



Dorothy Arzner's *Wife*

Lesbian minor cinema

Richard Fung's *Sea in the Blood*

The courtroom and the closet

The unanswered question of *Forrest Gump*

# SCREENS

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# Screen

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## issue editor

Jackie Stacey

LEE WALLACE: Dorothy Arzner's *Wife*: heterosexual sets, homosexual scenes **391**

PATRICIA WHITE: Lesbian minor cinema **410**

LILY CHO: Future perfect loss: Richard Fung's *Sea in the Blood* **426**

ZOË DRUICK: The courtroom and the closet in *The Thin Blue Line* and *Capturing the Friedmans* **440**

VICTOR FAN: The unanswered question of *Forrest Gump* **450**

## reports

KAY ARMATAGE: The Women's Film History Project and Women and the Silent Screen **462**

TIM BERGFELDER and SARAH STREET: European Network for Cinema and Media Studies Conference **468**

JAMES WHITFIELD: Beginnings and Endings in Films, Film and Film Studies **471**

## reviews

ROSIE THOMAS: Ranjani Mazumdar, *Bombay Cinema: an Archive of the City* **477**

STEVE NEALE: Scott Higgins, *Harnessing the Technicolor Rainbow: Color Design in the 1930s* **482**

ANNE MOREY: Melvyn Stokes, *D.W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation: a History of 'The Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time'* **485**

PAUL JULIAN SMITH: Phil Powrie, Bruce Babington, Ann Davies and Chris Perriam, *Carmen on Film: a Cultural History* **488**

PHILIPPA LOVATT: Alan Grossman and Áine O'Brien (eds), *Projecting Migration: Transcultural Documentary Practice* **491**

MARTINE BEUGNET: Andrew Spicer (ed.), *European Film Noir* **495**

RYAN SHAND: Karen L. Ishizuka and Patricia R. Zimmermann (eds), *Mining the Home Movie: Excavations in Histories and Memories* **499**

BETH JOHNSON: Victoria Best and Martin Crowley, *The New Pornographies: Explicit Sex in Recent French Fiction and Film*; Clarissa Smith, *One for the Girls! The Pleasures and Practices of Reading Women's Porn* **502**

BRYONI TREZISE: Antonia Lant and Ingrid Periz (eds), *The Red Velvet Seat: Women's Writing on the First Fifty Years of Cinema* **507**

## cover illustration

Rosalind Russell and John Boles in *Craig's Wife* (Dorothy Arzner, 1936).

## Dorothy Arzner's *Wife*: heterosexual sets, homosexual scenes

LEE WALLACE

*The only real freedom we have left is the home.  
Only there can we express anything we want*

William Haines

In 1936, at the height of her career in the Hollywood studio system, Dorothy Arzner directed *Craig's Wife* (Columbia Pictures, 1936), a domestic melodrama featuring Rosalind Russell as Harriet Craig, a woman whose obsessive preoccupation with controlling the immaculate interior of the marital home eventually drives away her adoring husband. Frequently credited as the vehicle that lifted Russell from bit-player to star, *Craig's Wife* is equally significant in marking the eclipse of another acting career – that of William Haines, who specialized in smart-talking rather than romantic roles and peaked as a star in 1930 when he was voted Hollywood's number-one box-office draw in the Quigley poll. By mid 1931 Haines's career was already in decline, with Louis B. Mayer cutting his salary and announcing that he would not renew his contract, decisions influenced in part by the MGM star's disregard for the protocols of public discretion by which Hollywood managed homosexuality and other publicly unacceptable behaviours. Although the trade magazines continued to hint at reasons for his perennial bachelorhood, Haines made the transition to Mascot Pictures in 1934 and continued acting until 1936 when, in late June and early July, he was involved in a sexual scandal in which his partner Jimmie Shields was alleged to have molested a six-year-old boy at El Porto beach. Despite the local police investigation determining there was nothing on which

- 1 William J. Mann, *Wisecracker: the Life and Times of William Haines, Hollywood's First Openly Gay Star* (New York, NY: Viking Penguin, 1998), pp. 206–8, 259–69.
- 2 Ibid., pp. 282–3. Formal credit for art direction on the film is given to Stephen Goosson, the original designer.
- 3 For a richly illustrated account of Haines's influential career as a designer, see Peter Schifando and Jean H. Mathison, *Class Act: William Haines, Legendary Hollywood Decorator* (New York, NY: Pointed Leaf, 1995).
- 4 Claire Johnston (ed.), *The Works of Dorothy Arzner: Towards a Feminist Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1975).
- 5 The essays anthologized in Constance Penley (ed.), *Feminism and Film Theory* (New York, NY and London: Routledge, 1988) are: Claire Johnston, 'Dorothy Arzner: critical strategies', pp. 36–45, Pam Cook, 'Approaching the work of Dorothy Arzner', pp. 46–56, Jacqueline Suter, 'Feminist discourse in *Christopher Strong*', pp. 89–103, and Janet Bergstrom, 'Rereading the work of Claire Johnston', pp. 80–88.

a legal indictment could stand, the incident made national headlines because of the mob assault it precipitated on Haines, Shields and their gay guests at their summer house in El Porto.<sup>1</sup> In the same month that the El Porto scandal broke, Arzner, who was always discreet about her own homosexual relationships, approached Haines to work on *Craig's Wife*, which had already entered production. Seen only in the interior sets that Arzner informally commissioned him to redesign, Haines's uncredited contribution to *Craig's Wife* completed his transformation from leading man to interior designer, a professional role in which open knowledge of his homosexuality would prove less of a career impediment.<sup>2</sup>

Haines's talent for interior design, which he had been offering as a paid service through Haines Foster, Inc. since 1933, was confirmed by the look of the film, securing him an offscreen position as a celebrity designer whose gayness was a foregone conclusion.<sup>3</sup> In stark contrast to this biographical narrative of sexual notoriety and professional success, the fictional Harriet Craig's talent for interior design (also confirmed by the look of the film) spells the end of her middle-class marriage and leads to her ultimate isolation within the empty family home. The suggestion that homosexuality and heterosexuality have different relations to the spatial and narrative coordinates of domesticity and publicity is not a new one, but the particular combination of elements evidenced in *Craig's Wife* – lesbian director, gay designer, heterosexual mise-en-scène – invites critical inquiry because it has the potential to break open a number of accepted truths about sexuality and space as they pertain to Hollywood melodrama.

Though hardly substantial, the archive of writing on Arzner punches above its weight in critical terms. Since the publication of a pamphlet of essays to accompany a British Film Institute retrospective of her films in 1975, Arzner has frequently provided the rubric through which a feminist rethinking of both film practice and the masculinist paradigms of film criticism has occurred.<sup>4</sup> Now over thirty years old, the essays by Claire Johnston and Pam Cook, which read Arzner's films as evidence of a feminist counter-cinema practice resistant to the dominant system of classical narrative film, continue to provide the starting point for many discussions of not just Arzner's oeuvre but of feminist film theory more generally. Both are included in Constance Penley's landmark anthology *Feminism and Film Theory*, alongside later essays by Jacqueline Suter and Janet Bergstrom that reengage with Arzner's films in order to contest the subversive function of rupture and contradiction within the classical Hollywood romance narrative and its consequences for female representation as put forward by Johnston and Cook.<sup>5</sup> As Judith Mayne has pointed out, the proponents of both sides of this unresolved debate have in common an inability to focus on Arzner's lesbianism, despite a fascination with her butch professional persona at the level of image. Arguing that feminist film criticism's high circulation of photographic images of a crop-haired, besuited Arzner – masculinized by her proximity to either the usually invisible machinery of Hollywood

6 See Judith Mayne, *The Woman at the Keyhole: Feminism and Women's Cinema* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 89–123, 'Lesbian looks: Dorothy Arzner and female friendship', in *Bad Object Choices* (eds), *How Do I Look?* (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1991), pp. 103–43, and *Directed by Dorothy Arzner* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994).

7 Consider, for instance, the many institutional commissions that advanced the architectural career of Arzner's contemporary Julia Morgan. See Sara Holmes Boutelle, *Julia Morgan, Architect* (New York, NY: Abbeville Press, 1988, revised 1995), pp. 83–127. For further discussion of Morgan's career and its place in the spatial history of homosexuality, see Aaron Betsky, *Queer Space: Architecture and Same-Sex Desire* (New York, NY: William Morrow, 1997), pp. 102–4.

production (oversized cameras and tracking equipment) or its familiar onscreen fetish, female stars – amounts to a disavowal of her lesbianism, Mayne has scrupulously documented details of the director's professional and private life in order to argue that her sexual orientation has critical implications for readings of her work, as well as for concepts of auteurship more generally.<sup>6</sup>

In her 1994 monograph on Arzner, Mayne emphasizes the director's consistent representation of strong, resourceful female characters and the women-oriented communities that feature in many of her films. As Mayne recognizes, the girls' dormitories, women's boarding houses, dance studios and dressing rooms that serve as backdrops in films such as *The Wild Party* (1929), *Working Girls* (1931) and *Dance, Girl, Dance* (1940) assist the profiling of relationships other than those mandated by the conventionally dominant heterosexual romance plot. If not precisely lesbian, these story spaces nonetheless articulate the emotional and physical ambitions, intimacies and rivalries that exist among unmarried women in close quarters that are not those of the conjugal or familial home that is the usual setting for female melodrama. Moreover, these alternative fictional settings or chronotopes have real-world counterparts in the institutional architectures of the 1920s and 1930s, which were specifically designed to house the aspirations of a generation of newly independent young women otherwise adrift in the urban centres of prewar America. Frequently commissioned by philanthropic organizations or professional women's clubs, these actual women's hostels, gymnasiums and sorority houses gave mutual emphasis to female ambition and companionship, intellectual pursuit and physical recreation, all elements that were amplified in the Arzner films set in similarly feminocentric or homosocial locations.<sup>7</sup> Yet the feminist orientation of space, whether real or fictional, is not the same as the lesbian orientation of person. If criticism is increasingly comfortable designating Arzner as a lesbian director, it has yet to address the question occluded by Mayne's line of inquiry: what is the relation between homosocial space and homosexual narrative, particularly in its lesbian iteration? For Mayne, the connecting tissue between homosociality and homosexuality is biography, but this question can also be formulated as one of story space rather than life.

Precisely because the usual formal hierarchies of narrative film prioritize character and plot over space, shifting the critical focus away from questions of sexual identity to questions of scene allows the issue of homosexual representation to emerge with new complexity. This line of investigation is particularly productive when considering *Craig's Wife*, Arzner's most sustained foray into domestic melodrama, a genre in which there is a seemingly tight fit between the heterosexually-aligned story and its definitive setting in the marital home. Unlike other Arzner heroines who are located within the sex-segregated environments of unmarried life and establish relationships with other women even as they pursue romances with men, Harriet Craig scarcely ventures beyond a

- 8 Elsie de Wolfe began her designing career with stage sets and decorating the interior of the New York home she shared with her partner Elisabeth Marbury, a theatrical agent and producer. For an account of her career and influence on the field, see Penny Sparke, Mitchell Owens and Elsie de Wolfe, *Elsie de Wolfe: the Birth of Interior Decoration* (New York, NY: Acanthus Press, 2005). For the queer implications of de Wolfe's style, see Betsy, *Queer Space*, pp. 98–102.
- 9 Kathleen McHugh, 'Housekeeping in Hollywood: the case of *Craig's Wife*', *Screen*, vol. 35, no. 2 (1994), p. 127. This shift in colour scheme was at least partially motivated by the demands of the shift in medium, since white walls allowed figures to be distinguished in the tonalities of gray registered on black-and-white film stock. For an account of the late-1930s Hollywood art direction 'craze for whites and creams', see Juan Antonio Ramírez, *Architecture for the Screen: a Critical Study of Set Design in Hollywood's Golden Age*, trans. John F. Moffitt (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004), p. 91.

home in which she is no more pleasant to her female relatives and domestic helps than she is to her husband Walter (John Boles). If Arzner's single girls are found inside homosocial spaces that retain an oddly tangential relation to the heterosexual romances that occur on their periphery, Harriet faces the opposite problem: despite the emotional distance she maintains from her husband throughout the film, as a married woman she is sexually contiguous with the house in which she resides, a relation condensed in the term housewife. Domestic melodrama, even when it explores the insufficiency of married life, nonetheless upholds the principle of conjugal intimacy. This melodramatic convention by which heterosexual femininity and domestic location, identity and place, are metonymically linked has no same-sex parallel: a wife who does not sleep with her husband is still considered to be straight, whereas two men or two women who share a college room – both situations exemplified in critically ignored scenes from *Craig's Wife* – cannot be presumed gay.

One suspects that the flamboyantly homosexual Haines, who passed for a playboy Southern gentleman in Hollywood, delighted in designing the pretentious yet hollow look of the Craig house sets, scornful as he was of professional and amateur interior decorators alike who lacked his knack for putting together discriminatingly elegant, intensely social rooms. By the mid 1930s Haines had already established a reputation for designing in the open modern style of Elsie de Wolfe, whose well-known advocacy of white walls became a signature in his own developing style.<sup>8</sup> White walls – and not only walls but white rugs, white curtains, white furniture – are certainly much in evidence inside the Craig house, where they are aesthetically correct but symbolically wrong. As Kathleen McHugh notes in a historically-minded essay on the film's representation of housekeeping, the stage directions for the Broadway play on which the film is based:

call for dark greens and deep browns livened by canary yellows and golds, all against 'dark, highly polished wood', but Arzner stresses Harriet's fastidiousness by decorating the Craig home primarily in white. White rugs cover the floor, white curtains hang in most of the windows. All of the walls in the interior and exterior of the house are beige or white.<sup>9</sup>

Not quite all, since in an early scene in which Walter Craig and his live-in aunt Miss Austen (Alma Kruger) share a meal in the dining room, the rare sociability of the event, filmed in a classic two-shot, is accented against the hand-painted wallpaper which depicts a pastoral landscape that wraps around the entire room, an effect Haines would repeat in numerous designs he devised for his elite client base of Hollywood stars, directors and executives. Harriet, however, rarely enters either this room or the intimate shot composition it is associated with, being more typically positioned against a flat background, looking not at the person who speaks to her but past the camera into an empty middle distance that

Alma Kruger, as Walter's aunt, faces the Craig couple, Rosalind Russell and John Boles.



<sup>10</sup> Arzner's reluctance to engage shot/reverse-shot sequences, a directorial trait first identified by Suter, is the cornerstone of Beverle Houston's account of *Craig's Wife*, where it becomes the means by which, in the 'last several moments of the film', the spectator is 'denied the primary mechanism of suture and mastery through identification'. Beverle Houston, 'Missing in action: notes on Dorothy Arzner', *Wide Angle*, vol. 6, no. 3 (1984), p. 31.

never succumbs to a reverse-shot.<sup>10</sup> Both architectural and cinematic elements of the mise-en-scene advance the viewer's perception of Harriet's inadequacy against a domestic backdrop that is usually considered heterosexuality's conventional, if not natural, framework. Unlike her domesticated husband, Harriet is not visually incorporated into the scene of family life but dramatically set off from it, an effect exacerbated by other elements in Haines's design repertoire that also work against the conventional gendered ideologies of hearth and home.

Credited with ending the West Coast commitment to pseudo-Spanish colonial motifs, Haines's early Hollywood Regency style, as it became known, involved an elegant and eclectic mix of antiques, Chinoiserie and modern art deco, all of it deployed to create interiors fit for movie stars and their sometimes unconventional lifestyles. Haines developed his style remodelling the Spanish colonial property on North Stanley Drive into which he and Shields moved in 1926 and where they stayed until 1964, when they moved to a more modest, but equally lush, house on Larna Lane, Brentwood. As an interior designer his first significant clients were Joan Crawford, Carole Lombard and Constance Bennett. His most obviously gay commission came in 1935, the year preceding *Craig's Wife*, when his close friend George Cukor asked him to work with architect James E. Dolena on the interiors of his residence at 9611 Cordell Drive. The year following *Craig's Wife*, Jack and Ann Warner engaged Haines and architect Roland E. Coate to transform their Spanish-style estate into a Georgian mansion with period antiques and many of the neoclassical flourishes displayed on a far smaller scale in the Arzner-commissioned sets. Signature components of Haines's Hollywood style to be found within Harriet's East Coast home include the richly upholstered chaise, canopy bed, elaborate mouldings and Georgian architectural details, as well as the novel placement of a telephone in a bedroom, an innovation he took to extremes in the Cukor

residence where even bathrooms and poolrooms had telephones. In diegetic terms, however, these stylish furnishings register not the social cachet of the Hollywood insider but a specifically conjugal incompatibility: when Walter Craig rises from where he has been sitting on his wife's bed she moves forward to smooth out the indent he leaves in the counterpane; when he finally makes use of the inviting daybed in the living room it is only because he has realized his marriage is over and in lying down fully clothed he finally relinquishes any claim he may have had on the private spaces and intimate relations of married life.

Far from being a distortion of Hollywood style enacted for the specific requirements of the film, this ability to imbue domestic interiors with a quality of heterosexual estrangement was already recognized as Haines's peculiar talent, particularly by female clients who frequently called him in to redesign their houses after they divorced their husbands. In 1933, for instance, after Lombard and William Powell divorced, Haines undertook a pro bono restyling of the actress's Brentwood home. Reviewing the altered interior, *Motion Picture* magazine commented that it contained 'no place for tweeds or slacks', before concluding that the home's 'femininity is so unmistakable that your first glance tells you that it is occupied by a single woman – a woman, moreover, who has no intention of marrying', as if sexual status could be determined by domestic setting alone.<sup>11</sup> In Crawford's case three failed marriages meant three interior makeovers by Haines in twenty-five years. As these real-life examples of divorce and serial marriage suggest, the more glamorously feminine the interior scene achieved within the narrative film, the less likely it is to fix the fashion-plate Harriet within the stable coordinates of married life.

Although the rooms of the Craig house recall Haines's other residential commissions, in one case including furniture from the house he shared with Shields on North Stanley Drive, their fictional attribution to Harriet Craig means that their scale and conjunction of elements is often deliberately skewed. As in a modern McMansion, the oversized rooms dwarf the inhabitants and the interiors and, insofar as they are credited to Harriet, everywhere betray the mark of cultural aspiration. In particular, the historical references embedded in the reproduction furniture and Grecian ornaments do not sit well with the middle-class values and aesthetic neutrality typically animating female melodrama. Classical statuary abounds within the public spaces of the house, most of it isolated in space as if the figures were of museum quality and not off-the-shelf household bric-a-brac. A suburban residence on a monumental scale, the centre of the Craig house is dominated by a full-height marble-columned entrance atrium from which a curved stairway leads to an open landing in a manner that suggests pretentiousness and grandeur rather than practicality. Downstairs on either side of the vast entrance hall are steps down to dining and living rooms which, crossed by the line connecting the front door and stairway, form the central dramatic axis of the interior action. Although cinematically tight, this open-plan

11 Quoted in Schifando and Mathison, *Class Act*, p. 60.

configuration of interior space dwarfs the human scale, with the distance between rooms requiring almost athletic stamina from the actors as they track back and forth, up and down, in a deep field that remains technically out of focus yet thematically sharp.

The set and furnishings would be more at home on a Broadway stage, on which the distancing perspective of the fourth wall might make their dimensions appear less obtuse. Within the less rigid perspective of a camera shot, objects are frequently larger than they seem and tend to take on a dramatic life of their own, a feature commonly noted of melodrama's mise-en-scene, whereby background elements are never neutral but reflect otherwise unacknowledged aspects of character such as duplicity or ambivalence. In *Craig's Wife*, however, this tendency of inanimate objects to come to symbolic life in the vicinity of the camera is reversed in the climactic scene of the film, in which a flesh-and-blood character takes on the quality of stone. In a scene that marks a crisis point in her marriage, Harriet Craig appears in the living room in an evening dress that resembles the stone draperies worn by the ornamental female figures which populate the house in the absence of actual female friends. Designed by Lon Anthony, the belted toga dress with gilt-wreathed, dropped shoulder-line reinforces the climax of the film more convincingly than the overweight dialogue, much of it retained from George Kelly's 1926 Pulitzer prize-winning stage play, as Mrs Craig, her hair braided Grecian style, simply leans against the oversized mantelpiece displaying the emotional flexibility of a stone caryatid.<sup>12</sup> Untouched by any of her husband's sentimental arguments, Harriet merges with the interior fittings of the house, simultaneously instantiating the spatial principle of domestic melodrama which equates femininity with its setting in the home while evacuating it of its customary narrative and ideological intent: the endorsement of heterosexual normativity. Visually embodying the classical ideal of femininity, Harriet stonewalls her husband before the hearth that would ordinarily function as the heart of the home. Alongside her on the mantelpiece stands the Attic shape of the black urn decorated with marble men and maidens familiar to us from the opening scene, a fake antiquity that has pride of place within the complex aesthetic code of a film that everywhere asserts the domestic incompatibility of men and women while preserving the glamorous veneer of heterosexuality.

The static theatrical staging of scenes within the Craig house extends to the way actors make entrances from offscreen space then stand and deliver their lines as if unassisted by cinematic projection and sound recording, or the way dramatic dialogue invariably dictates camera action. Rather than being a weakness of the film, this is entirely consistent with the overall spatial design of the film and the drive to bestow on Harriet the quality of alabaster until she is finally indistinguishable from the place she calls home, an empty monument to married life.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Commenting on *Craig's Wife*, Molly Haskell insightfully notes that Arzner's directorial input is often concentrated in 'costume, set design and editing', through which she 'forces a "high art" motif on material which resists such upgrading'. Molly Haskell, 'Women in Paris', *Village Voice*, 28 April 1975, p. 78. More recently, Jane Gaines has discussed Arzner's collaborations with costume designers in the context of a gay and lesbian disdain for realism. Jane Gaines, 'Dorothy Arzner's trousers', *Jump Cut*, vol. 37 (1992), pp. 88–98.

<sup>13</sup> In her account of a 1973 interview with Arzner, Francine Parker recalls Arzner's claim that she deliberately shot *Craig's Wife* 'in the right order as though it were a play'. Francine Parker, 'Approaching the art of Arzner', *Action*, vol. 8, no. 4 (1973), p. 13. The following year, in her heavily cited interview with Gerald Peary and Karyn Kay, Arzner nonetheless criticized her collaborator Robert Milton as a 'fine stage director' who seemed not to 'know the camera's limitations or its expansions'. Gerald Peary and Karyn Kay, 'Interview with Dorothy Arzner', *Cinema*, no. 34 (1974), p. 14.

14 Giuliana Bruno, 'Fashions of living', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, vol. 20, no. 3 (2003), pp. 70.

15 *Ibid.*

16 *Ibid.*, pp. 169–70.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 169.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 170.

Harriet's association with the house is underscored in an essay by Giuliana Bruno, who in the context of a more general discussion of gendered identity and space makes a brief reference to Arzner's film. 'As Harriet Craig's obsession with the house intensifies,' writes Bruno, 'a narrative shift occurs: Craig's wife is becoming a *housewife*. Wrestling with the topos of the term, Harriet works from within its confines toward her goal of freedom.'<sup>14</sup> All Harriet's manipulations of domestic space are, for Bruno, motivated by her attempt to free herself from her status as Craig's wife and make 'room for herself'. While this reading of Harriet's motivation is not an untypical one, Bruno's essay productively departs from previous readings of the film in her frank acknowledgment of the problem the end of the film poses to feminist recuperation. By the final scene Harriet 'has, *tout court*, become the house'.<sup>15</sup> This transformation is 'epitomized in a long shot in which Harriet Craig looks like a column as she stands in front of the staircase of her home. She has become the pillar of the house.'<sup>16</sup> Shot from below, elements of the cinematic mise-en-scene, including dress and decor, combine so that the willowy figure of Russell becomes another of the architectural features that make up the set in made-to-order Hollywood style with its abundance of columns, pilasters, pediments and niches. 'For Harriet the housewife, "house" and "wife" have been incorporated to such an extent that the wife has *become* the house.'<sup>17</sup> But, as Bruno is forced to conclude, this visual conflation of character and space 'is not a happy ending. As Harriet Craig sits alone in her home, having conquered ownership of herself and her house . . . the walls appear to be closing in on [her], as if there were too much space and yet not enough. A house devoid of motion, and with closed doors, is as much a prison as the marriage it was built to contain.'<sup>18</sup> Leaving aside the question of Harriet's happiness since it inevitably returns us to matters of character and plot, identity and sentiment, or the usual terrain of melodrama, Bruno's brief account of the film is particularly useful for focusing the relation between occupied space and vacant space within the film. After all, the house that Harriet takes possession of is bestowed on her not by the deed that her lawyer husband assures her will be transferred to her name as part of their divorce settlement but by a visual distortion of figure and background, an effect intensified by the sheer emptiness of the final scene, all other characters having left for an elsewhere that claims no further screen presence.

If *Craig's Wife* visually entraps Harriet within the architectural coordinates of a finally empty house, that point is reinforced by the film's prior and unexpected insistence on the expanded social world in which her domestic separatism makes tragic sense. While Arzner's conscious decision to maintain theatrical continuity of time and space in *Craig's Wife* can account for the theatrical staging of the domestic scenes, it cannot account for the frequent cross-cutting between different locations and the doggedness with which the film visualizes spaces that are not essential to the viewer's comprehension of the plot. Ostensibly included to open out the stage play's single setting and convey the simultaneity of

19 As is well known, Arzner's elevation to director was made on the basis of her demonstrable skill as a cutter and editor at Paramount, which culminated in her working with director James Cruze on two historical epics: *The Covered Wagon* (1923) and *Old Ironsides* (1926). Although formal credit for the editing of *Craig's Wife* is given to Viola Lawrence, when interviewed Arzner always maintained she 'edited in the camera' as she went along: 'I shot the way I thought the mind would wish to progress – from far away to closeup. No medium-range shots and closeups of the whole cast as they do today.' Mary Murphy, 'Tribute to an unsung pioneer', *Los Angeles Times*, Part IV, 24 January 1975, p. 16.

events, transitions to scenes outside the house are managed via a virtual compendium of cinematic devices: dissolves, fades, black-outs and horizontal and vertical wipes, often appearing in quick succession.<sup>19</sup> Less than subtle, these techniques are backed up by equally heavy-handed dramatic mechanisms for story advancement, particularly the repeated reliance on the arrival of newspapers to deliver plot information and telephone calls to motivate shifts in location, all of which reveal the artificiality of the space–time continuum they nonetheless promote. Firmly established within the diegesis, these peripheral locations – such as the hospital in which Harriet's sister Lillian Landreth (Elizabeth Risdon) lies dying, or the brief telephone exchange and police station scenes which clumsily advance the complicated subplot in which Walter and Harriet become tangentially involved in a murder investigation – confirm the film's refusal of the usual hierarchies of classical narration which conventionally assist the viewer in distinguishing between necessary and incidental information and scenes. Far from being a failing in cinematic technique or an inability to achieve classical continuity style, this refusal to rank diegetic elements is key to the film's advancement of a counterplot that would otherwise recede behind the conventional scenic dominance given to the heterosexual story. The almost obtrusive depiction of ancillary locations in *Craig's Wife* implies that all story spaces are equal, including those that are never represented on screen.

These editing techniques are at their most concentrated when called on to propel the somewhat leaden murder subplot involving Adelaide and Fergus Passmore, which takes up the central section of the film and functions to instil in the naive and trusting Walter the skills of a detective, since nothing less is needed for him to see what to everyone else is patently obvious: that his love for his wife is not reciprocated. Slotted between melodramatic soft-focus closeups of tear-filled eyes, one sentimentally assigned to Lillian at the beginning of the film, the other given more ambiguously to Harriet in the final scene when she receives news of her sister's death, the Passmore murder investigation uses hardboiled clichés, such as the closeup scanning of directory pages and back-and-forth wipes between the female telephone exchange operator and tough-talking police precinct. Standard in police procedural films, these ancillary locations and associated narration techniques, whereby objects and information isolated within the visual field can be used to signal causal relations of plot and resolve questions of character motivation with forensic certainty, are eventually transferred across to the marriage plot in a gesture that makes a man, or at least a suspicious husband, of Walter Craig. The generic transfer of the narrational structure of detection to the domestic melodrama is demonstrated in an otherwise gratuitous scene transition executed on the closeup of the murder weapon. Cued by a phone-call interrupting a police detective's interrogation of Mrs Craig in the living room, the scenic introduction of police headquarters, filled to the brim with uniformed officers who will

not see celluloid again, merely provides an excuse for the plain-clothes cop to vacate the Craig house so that Walter can return to it and assume the authoritative role of wife questioner. The melodramatic content of the subsequent confrontation scene between husband and wife, which earnestly contemplates masculine bewilderment and feminine justification, is of so little dramatic value that Arzner twice interrupts it with the entrance of the housekeeper, whose only concern is getting Mr and Mrs Craig to sit down to dinner. By this point in the film, procedural methods are so in the ascendant that dialogue, particularly highly emotive dialogue of the kind that husbands and wives freely exchange, is less important than the visual closeup on the overstuffed ashtray by which Walter signals, and Harriet understands, that their marriage is over. Once again, *Craig's Wife* overturns the classical rule that centres story development on strongly defined characters in favour of a more free-ranging capacity to locate the story anywhere at all, in an ashtray, for instance, or outside the house that otherwise dominates interpretation of the film.

The Passmore residence on Willow Avenue is key to establishing the spatial coordinates by which Harriet is unforgivingly positioned inside the conjugal home but outside the marriage it normally connotes. If the reasons behind marital estrangement in the Craig house remain oddly obscure, the Passmore residence is the setting for open – and openly sexual – hostilities between husband and wife. Once the camera follows Walter through the wrought-iron gate that protects the Passmore townhouse from the street, the interior set suggests a form of cultural entitlement against which all of Harriet's domestic riches seem awkwardly and pretentiously nouveau. From the moment the crumpled Fergus Passmore (Thomas Mitchell) opens the front door, drink in hand, throws Walter's coat aside and takes him through to a den filled to the point of cliché with masculine accessories (an open bar, cigar boxes, books and architectural drawings), Walter finds himself in a domestic milieu in which the differences between men and women, however fraught, are a constitutive element of the household design. When the beautiful but evasive Adelaide Passmore (Kathleen Burke) glides across the room, adjusting her jewellery and refusing her husband's invitation to stay home, her presence endorses an explicitly sexualized aesthetic that has as its loudest critic not Mrs Craig but the straight-talking Craig housekeeper Mrs Harold (Jane Darwell), who on subsequently learning of the location of the Passmore murders responds instantly: 'I know that Willow Avenue kind with their high steppin', loose livin' friends, their cocktails and their meals at all hours and their dirty oil paintings'. The artistic nudes that, in Mrs Harold's imagination, line the walls of the Passmore residence reflect a heterosexual sexual culture, whereas the naked breasts of the faux Grecian statue that stands on the upstairs landing in the Craig house are just another externalization of Harriet's aggressive femininity, heterosexual in cast but freestanding in so far as it evidences no necessary relation to men.<sup>20</sup> Although Harriet has no time

<sup>20</sup> In this context, see Lucy Fischer's discussion of the 'emphatic (if abstract) sense of sexuality' that imbues the art deco figurines of women frequently seen in Hollywood cinema of the 1920s and 1930s. Lucy Fisher, *Designing Women: Cinema, Art Deco and the Female Form* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 6.

for the Passmores alive or dead, they nonetheless serve to precipitate the crisis in her own loveless marriage when Walter subsequently defends Adelaide's extramarital affair and Fergus's murder/suicide. Speaking as both husband and lawyer, Walter lends his sentimental and professional authority to the notion that heterosexual romance, here a literal crime of passion, is its own justification. Yet it is precisely this entrenched assumption – the assumption that the story belongs to heterosexuality – that Arzner's film systematically undoes in its highly mannered visualization of Adelaide's adultery. Operating within the constraints of a production code that overdetermines both homosexual and heterosexual representation, *Craig's Wife* can only confirm the rocky state of the Passmore marriage obliquely. Cut loose from his wife for the night and looking for adventure, Walter's friend Billy Birkmire (Raymond Walburn) sits with his wayward father in a theatre bar where he observes Adelaide Passmore meeting an unknown man. Arm in arm, the handsome couple crosses the scene in an eloquent right-to-left movement that is all that is needed to establish Adelaide's infidelity and the compromised state of the Passmore marriage. The sexual significance of this action – nothing more than a woman passing through a scene – is reinforced by a seemingly deliberate instance of stilted editing: the reaction shot given to Birkmire when he sees Adelaide's arrival recues the film so that the wayward wife stepping down the final few steps of a staircase arm in arm with an unknown man is seen not once but twice, an impossibility in the real world as great as the impossibility of showing an actual sexual infidelity onscreen in 1936.

In comparison to Adelaide, whose every cool move references the well-known script of adultery, Harriet is most content when left alone in her glamorous boudoir with its satin covers and walk-in wardrobe filled to excess with dresses and hats and high-heeled shoes, the wearing of which provides her only reason for going out. As compelling as Harriet is to behold in her Lon Anthony gowns, she exercises no narrative claim to sexual agency, being upstaged in that arena by not only the sexy Adelaide but also by her overly earnest niece Ethel Landreth (Dorothy Wilson), whose aptitude for romance provides the film's other subplot. About Harriet, who is coiffed and groomed to the edge of feminine perfection, there is simply no story to tell.

Precisely because Harriet instantiates the role of trophy wife so well – a heterosexual figurine who represents the ideological form of domestic melodrama while draining it of its conventional lifeblood of affective content and generic storyline – Arzner can, in her ice-cold vicinity, cinematically validate other sexual possibilities conventionally denied narrative legibility. If, for instance, in the chill and stilted scenes between Mr and Mrs Craig, all of which occur within the pristine environment of the marital home, Arzner deliberately eschews camera movement, it is so she can reserve the sense of intimacy a mobile camera can bestow for those scenes that occur elsewhere, in locations more typically associated

21 Commenting on Arzner's film style in general, Richard Henshaw notes that her direction is 'invariably uplifted when she takes her camera outside the house and becomes involved with objects, landscape, and movement. In these cases, where cutting is not dependent on lines of dialogue, her strength as an editor surfaces.' Richard Henshaw, 'Women directors: 150 filmographies', *Film Comment*, vol. 8, no. 4 (1972), p. 34.

22 See, for instance, Melissa Sue Kurt, "'Spectacular spinelessness': the men in Dorothy Arzner's films", in Janet Todd (ed.), *Men by Women* (New York, NY: Holmes and Meier, 1982), pp. 196–7, Julia Lesage, 'The hegemonic female fantasy in *An Unmarried Woman* and *Craig's Wife*', *Film Reader*, no. 5 (1982), p. 90, and McHugh, 'Housekeeping in Hollywood', pp. 126–7.

23 Technically layering one recorded scene onto another, the illusion of the moving landscape framed by the mocked-up train window prefigures the bizarre death scene in Arzner's *Dance, Girl, Dance* (RKO, 1940), in which the dance teacher Madame Basilova (Maria Ouspenskaya) is mown down by a fake mise-en-scene of Manhattan traffic. Usually attired in a tailored suit and necktie and thus a butch stand-in for the director herself, the dance teacher, according to Mayne, is killed off the moment she puts on a froufrou hat. 'Femininity is lethal, at least for Basilova', argues Mayne, although the point might also be that the cinematic contest between those same-sex affiliations represented in the world of dance and the heterosexual relations that otherwise comprise the film's story get played out spatially as well as in terms of costume. Mayne, *Directed by Dorothy Arzner*, pp. 145. Elsewhere Mayne has allowed that Basilova is killed off 'in one of the most absurdly staged death scenes imaginable'. Mayne, 'Lesbian looks', p. 122.

with homosocial not conjugal relations.<sup>21</sup> Consider the three scenes that occur in the peripheral location of Northampton College, Massachusetts, where Harriet's independent young niece has, in events that precede the opening of the film, fallen in love with her instructor in Romance Languages, Gene Fredericks (Robert Allen). Travelling by train back from the Albany hospital in which her mother is dying, Ethel conveys to her disappointed aunt the news of her engagement, thus precipitating Harriet's comments on marriage as a contract to be engaged in without sentiment, a speech many interpretations of the film cite at length since it complies with their sense of the film as a feminist analysis of the gendered inequities of marriage.<sup>22</sup> At the conclusion of this exchange, after Ethel has distanced herself from her aunt's rationalization of marriage by requesting to send her fiance a telegram, the film cuts from the train carriage to Fredericks's college rooms. This gives significant screen time to a new location that is unnecessary to the plot, the conversation on the train being sufficient setup for the young man to ring the Craig house and inquire after his girlfriend, which is all the plot requires of him. The transition from carriage to college, conveniently established through a closeup of the telegram sent from one location to the other, yields to a more expansive frame which reveals Fredericks, telegram in hand, standing before his faculty colleague Ted. While the two men read the telegram, the mobile camera discloses that the desk at which Ted sits abuts another desk in a face-to-face arrangement more intimate than anything glimpsed in the Craig household, in which husband and wife keep to separate bedrooms. Determined to speak to Ethel, Fredericks rings her 'dizzy roommate' Bunny to obtain her aunt's address, which is reason enough for Arzner to explore yet another single-sex domain, the sorority house at which the phone is answered by a pyjama-clad girl who is required to provide the name and address of Ethel's aunt, once again information the film scarcely needs. Redundant to the story, Bunny's screen presence serves to establish a second location in which sheer proximity, unassisted by backstory or the other lumbering devices needed to establish heterosexual relations, breeds an easy physical familiarity between single girls, evidenced by the joshing and elbowing Bunny gets from her sorority sister at receiving a call from a man.

Both scenes – one in male college rooms, the other in a female dormitory – reveal a productive tension between the heterosexual plot and peripheral same-sex details that advance the straight action even as they point up its almost mechanistic nature. Involving only incidental persons and places, but aided by mobile figures and camerawork, the homosocial scenes are spatially energetic in comparison to the preceding scene in the train, in which the only indication of mobility is the back projection of an unfurling landscape glimpsed through the carriage windows across which married woman and affianced girl converse.<sup>23</sup> Although Mayne's account of *Craig's Wife* includes a lengthy discussion of the significance of the spatial composition of the scene in the railway

24 For Mayne's lengthy discussion of the train conversation scene, see *Directed by Dorothy Arzner*, pp. 126–9. Bruno also comments on the significance of the scene's composition in 'Fashions of living', p. 160.

25 See, in particular, Mayne's discussion of women-in-prison films in *Framed: Lesbians, Feminists and Media Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp. 115–45.

carriage, in which she notes that the blocking of actors requires the feminine *tête-à-tête* to be transacted across the visual impediment of an anonymous male figure situated in the background, she ignores the relationships put on display between men and men, women and women, in the college scenes through similar mise-en-scenic devices.<sup>24</sup> Unlike the scene in the train where the discussion of marriage between the two women is visually triangulated by the presence of a third masculine figure, the college scenes spatially quarantine the two genders. A textbook example of the kind of same-sex community that Mayne elsewhere celebrates, it remains unclear whether or not the homosocial space of the college has any homosexual significance.<sup>25</sup> While it is hard to read much into the nearness of office desks, when *Craig's Wife* returns to Northampton College later the same day, the college study shared by the two young male faculty members is surprisingly revealed as a bedroom. Second time around, the camera picks up Fredericks as he bursts into the room and follows him as he circumnavigates the desks. Strictly centred on the frustrated young man who feels denied access to his girlfriend, the camera pan allows us to glimpse – as if unrelatedly – his friend lying in bed reading. Caught lounging around in the daytime by a roommate who does not bother to knock, Ted has nothing to hide, unlike the faceless man on the train whose male silhouette must carry the blame for the gendered inequalities of marriage. Ted's bedroom scene adds nothing to the story until Fredericks once again takes up the telephone in an action that visually reconnects the shared twin room to Harriet's conjugal suite, where she has just finished defending herself against the intrusion of her husband who insists on sitting on the nuptial bed despite her admonishments against it. Once the temporal connection between homosocial scene (college rooms) and heterosexual set (marital bedroom) is made, the two locations can be read against each other in a way that makes clear that only one scene – Harriet's boudoir – has sexual implications, albeit negative ones, since we have already seen Walter bound ardently into Harriet's most intimate space to embrace his wife, only to be met by physical coolness and reproach. No sooner does Walter leave the room than Harriet removes any lingering sign of his presence, restoring the domestic scene to its immaculate state.

With little more than a stroke of a hand across a bedspread, Arzner can both reveal and rescind the presumptive relation between heterosexuality and the feminized space of domestic melodrama. Alternatively, the homosocial college scene, in which homosexuality is neither suggested nor denied, ends with Fredericks rummaging for travelling clothes in a dresser weighted down by an oversized photograph of Ethel, who looks as out of place in this institutional interior (an appealing amalgam of professional and domestic space) as Ted looks at home. By visually reaffirming the heterosexual coordinates of life beyond the sex-segregated precincts of college, the film puts on display not the naturalness of that progression but the inexplicable gap between the

- 26 See McHugh's reading of *Craig's Wife* in relation to historical transformations in understandings of marriage and domesticity, namely the shift from contractually based notions of marriage to those that conceive of a companionate relationship between a husband and wife who are considered emotionally and sexually compatible. Formerly dedicated to the rational maintenance of separate spheres, the modern housewife's role is increasingly to provide romantic companionship and emotional training, an ideological task greatly assisted by the developing forms of female melodrama. 'In indicting its heroine for not loving, feeling or suffering', argues McHugh, *Craig's Wife* 'indicts her for not partaking of a melodramatic sensibility.' McHugh, 'Housekeeping in Hollywood', p. 134.
- 27 Muriel Babcock, *Los Angeles Examiner*, nd., np.
- 28 Howard Barnes, *New York Herald Tribune*, 2 October 1936, p. 17.
- 29 Frank S. Nugent, *The New York Times*, 2 October 1936.
- 30 Robert Garland, 'Craig's Wife earns new glory as movie; sincere and gripping', *New York American*, 2 October 1936, p. 14.
- 31 There are numerous readings of the film which in criticizing Arzner for remaining too loyal to her theatrical source can thereby highlight her success in wresting the figure of Harriet Craig out of Kelly's misogynist stranglehold and investing her with a conflicted interior that draws an empathetic response from the female spectator. The clearest statement of this impulse can be found in Kurt, "Spectacular spinelessness", pp. 197–8. For a summary of contemporary responses to the 1925 play, which frequently included charges of misogyny, see William J. Lynch, 'Craig's Wife', in *Three Plays by George Kelly* (New York, NY: Limelight Editions, 1999), p. 289.

institution of Northampton College and the institution of marriage, whose architectural exemplar remains the Craig home.

What makes a home is, of course, the question posed by Kelly's original playscript, where it is clunkingly answered in the portentous dialogue that Mary McCall's screenplay retains for Miss Austen and Walter Craig, most of it defending historically emergent ideas of companionate marriage between men and women that could be found in numerous marital advice manuals from the same period.<sup>26</sup> On another cinematic level, however, Arzner's film restages this question of the sexual and emotional compatibility of men and women. Rather than being the misogynistic exposure of a frigid wife whose hard-edged distrust of men is manifest in the sterile environment she has created, Arzner's film explores sexuality primarily as an effect of the cinematic manipulation of space, where space is understood both scenically and in terms of a diegetic storyworld that extends beyond the edges of the screen. For this reason, the historical question posed by Arzner's film, as distinct from the question posed by Kelly's play, might be framed thus: in 1936, what makes a home unheterosexual?

Contemporary reviewers clearly detected something amiss in the configuration of the Craig household, finding Mrs Craig's love for her home symptomatic of an emotional insufficiency that is pathological. Russell, who had to be persuaded by Arzner to take on such an unsympathetic role, is congratulated by Muriel Babcock for her portrayal of 'the horrid, frigid Harriet Craig, who beneath a beautifully velvet exterior, extended so much malevolent selfishness', although other reviewers explicitly link Harriet's feminine perversity not to her repressed sexuality but to her overt materialism.<sup>27</sup> Things, not men, are what Harriet craves, according to Harold Barnes, who diagnoses her as 'a vicious and selfish wife, almost neurotically in love with her house and its objet d'art'.<sup>28</sup> Mrs Craig, Frank Nugent notes in *The New York Times*, can only respond to a husband once he has been made over 'into just another bit of house furnishing'.<sup>29</sup> Robert Garland, in *New York American*, agrees that the housewife is 'sick with the poison of possession, watches every lamp, every table, every chair. She keeps her eye on them, as, in a presidential year, a politician keeps his eye on Maine. The four walls and the goods and the chattels to be found therein obsess her. They are like drink to a chronic alcoholic'.<sup>30</sup> Given the misogyny implicit in these responses – a misogyny that extended beyond the reviewers to include those audiences reported to have cheered when Walter Craig finally stands up to his wife and deliberately smashes her most precious vase, an action overdetermined by the rules of domestic melodrama in which one empty vessel stands for another – it is hardly surprising that clearing Arzner from the charge of misogyny remains one of the central preoccupations of feminist critical writing on the film.<sup>31</sup> Yet what is equally remarkable in these contemporary responses is that from the moment the film premiered, reviewers recognized the importance of stage properties and set to a story in which a childless wife

32 *Modern Screen* (December 1936), p. 49. Columbia studio boss Harry Cohn, who was already annoyed that the director had engaged bit-player Russell for the lead role without consulting him, 'threatened to fire Arzner after the expense of [Haines's] redecoration was revealed'. Mann, *Wisecracker*, p. 282.

values her showcase house more than the conjugal relationship it is meant to protect. In *Craig's Wife*, the popular press concedes, background elements take a foreground role.

According to a story that ran in *Modern Screen* in December 1936, the *Craig's Wife* set 'was undoubtedly one of the most artistic and complete interiors ever constructed on a lot. A ten-room house was built in its entirety, with an estimated cost of \$60,000 in furnishings'.<sup>32</sup> Diegetically located in 39 Benton Road, Rye, New York, the exterior facade of the Craig dwelling, provided by an actual colonial-revival house in suburban Beverly Hills, is first glimpsed through the estranging grey wash of day-for-night shooting. Judged from the street, the Craig house has all the overblown grandeur and strict formality that marks its interior, its clipped and constrained topiary and hedges contrasting with the romantic garden next door where the neighbour, the perpetually breathless Mrs Frazier (Billie Burke), stands in the misty half-light watering her roses. Dwarfed by the Craig's mock-Palladian mansion complete with double-height entrance portico, Mrs Frazier's frame house in physical and thematic comparison seems held together by nothing more than the roses that cover its exterior.

Without any evident interior, Mrs Frazier's house is at a glance recognized as more of a home than the dwelling next door, the rooms of which the camera relentlessly measures. Within the Craig home the draughty emptiness of Harriet's interior scheme is similarly offset by Miss Austen's bedroom with its canopied four-poster bed, across which the camera shoots in an awkward setup that exaggerates the snugly confined nature of the space. Given free access to public and private domestic space, the camera also roams into the servants' quarters, both the well-appointed kitchen and the tiny maid's room directly adjacent to it, the better to point out the sentimental imbalance of a middle-class house in which compassionate relations are limited to a subclass of live-in domestics. Inside her bedroom, the maid Mazie (Nydia Westman) is seen packing her things to leave, having been sacked by Mrs Craig for inviting her boyfriend through the kitchen screen-door which, unlike the architectural centrepiece that is the front door, inadequately barricades the house against male intruders. Effectively ejected from the Craig house on the grounds of her heterosexuality, Mazie is shown removing a photographic pinup of Gary Cooper from her bedroom wall. Although her actual boyfriend bears no physical resemblance to the Hollywood star, Mazie's taste in house decoration is nonetheless a direct reflection of her sexual orientation, and the incidental gesture of removing the Hollywood pinup underscores the socially pretentious aspect of Harriet's decorative penchant for Greek nudes and Roman busts, even-handedly male and female, and its disregard for popular standards of heterosexual romance.

As Mazie prepares to leave a house that has no room for her commonplace version of heterosexuality, the housekeeper Mrs Harold stands by, ready to take over the role of representing an alternative to Mrs Craig's version of sexual and spatial fidelity. Frequently heard before she is seen, and absolved from the politeness of knocking by her

status as a domestic, the comings and goings of the widowed Mrs Harold, like those of the unmarried Miss Austen, are key to understanding Arzner's capacity to reshape heterosexual space and storyworld. With her claim to heterosexuality confined to the honorific, Mrs Harold exercises throughout the film a spatial licence that is ceded her in an opening shot of *Craig's Wife*, a closeup of her face that precedes the camera pan across to the Grecian urn that it would be easy to mistake for the inaugural image and dominant symbolic figure in the film. Ultimately broken, as directed by Kelly's playscript, the screenlife of the urn is less important than the mirror it sits before, since it is in that visually complex surface that Mrs Harold's meaty face is brought into cinematic alignment with the more patrician countenance of Miss Austen. In separate scenes in the downstairs living room, both women are seen conducting difficult conversations with Harriet Craig, whose two-faced nature is confirmed by her screen image being doubled in the mirror into which she gazes. In both cases, Harriet is filmed from behind, the low-angle shot capturing both the reflection of her face and, elevated above it, in the depths of the mirror, the face of her female interlocutor. Harriet's duplicitous nature is captured by her appearance in both the room and its reflection, whereas the integrity of Mrs Harold and Miss Austen, who stand physically behind the camera's forward scope, is confirmed by the unitary nature of their image as it appears solely in the mirror. Disembodied by reason of camera-angle, the two women's faces are positioned in exactly the same visually recessive spot in a compositional setup that attests to the capacity of the cinema to carve out new spatial dimensionalities. Separated by the temporal gap between the two scenes, the faces of the two women appearing in the same purely cinematic space nonetheless signal the possibility of a superimposition that will subsequently become the signature gesture of a number of films that deploy female facial doubling to explore the possibilities of lesbian story and the conditions of cinematic narration to which it inevitably relates.<sup>33</sup>

Already linked by their mise-en-scenic doubling, it is hardly surprising that Miss Austen and Mrs Harold eventually depart the film together for other adventures, circumnavigating a storyworld that is far larger and more inclusive than the glamorously heterosexual set designed by Haines. Despite being dependent residents of the Craig household, the two unmarried women, a widowed housekeeper and a spinster aunt, are more spatially autonomous throughout the film than its nominal head Walter, a thoroughly domesticated man who always behaves as if his wife can see his every move. Free to come and go whenever Harriet is not about, the two women simultaneously inhabit the same onscreen space twice, once when they make Mrs Frazier welcome inside the house and a second time when they arrange Miss Austen's departure from it. The second task requires the two women to enter the previously unexplored realm of Miss Austen's bedroom, where they are interrupted by the lummo of a removal man who manages to scar the otherwise adamantine surface of the house on the way to taking Miss Austen's

33 First deployed in *Mädchen in Uniform* (Leontine Sagan, 1931), facial superimposition remains integral to both modernist and postmodernist investigations of the lesbian story, as can be seen in Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966) and David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001).

trunk out of the symbolically loaded front door. While this disfigurement of the polished floor is given a scene of its own in which Harriet bemoans the stupidity of the hired man to his face, there is no filmic representation of the more delicate transaction in which two women of a certain age agree a companionate relationship. Presumably not limited to the pay-and-notice clauses repeatedly invoked by Harriet in the context of hiring and firing her own domestic staff, the understanding achieved between Miss Austen and Mrs Harold is unspoken, negotiated outside the representational orders of both film and house. The only elaboration of their companionate relationship exists in the later bitchy exchange between Harriet and Mrs Harold, who is already dressed in her travelling clothes and set to depart the heterosexual house once and for all. Arguably the dramatic climax of the film, certainly for a lesbian audience, the brief scene between house-servant and housewife fully establishes that whatever it is that Miss Austen has engaged Mrs Harold to do for her, it is not 'keep house'.

While not defined as lesbian, neither are Miss Austen or Mrs Harold evidentially straight. Destined for the Ritz Carlton, New York, before a shared passage around the world, the two women circumvent the rules of heterosexual story and space, rules that in 1936 made it impossible to imply a lesbian couple in any less an oblique way. Not for them the front-door exit of the engaged couple, Fredericks and Ethel, who evacuate the house as if being in it one second longer would threaten their marital prospects. But no sooner than Walter ushers the straight couple through the front door, he is forced to reopen it to let past Miss Austen's trunk, an apt visual signifier for the cinematic closet and a queer stage property more mobile than the nailed-down components that make up the extravagantly heterosexual set.

With the Craig house emptied of both the heterosexual and non-heterosexual couple, all that remains is for the titular owner to abscond, a departure registered offscreen by the sound of a closing door. Once Harriet has confirmed Mr Craig's leaving with a look through the venetian blinds, she crosses the living room to adjust the two male busts on the mantelpiece. The decorative gesture compensates not for the loss of the husband but for the loss of the ornamental urn, which in textbook Hollywood Style might prove harder to replace.<sup>34</sup> As in the Lombard interior designed by Haines in 1933, the exquisitely heterosexual veneer is perfected when the vestigial sign of any former husband is finally removed. No longer encumbered by Walter and the stolid narrative outcomes he represents, Harriet's domestic freedom is now only compromised by the lingering claims of familial allegiance, which the film efficiently cancels with the arrival of a telegram from Albany bearing news of her sister's demise. Like the earlier aggressive entrance of Fredericks, this final sentimental challenge to Harriet's emotional containment requires an exterior shot in which an anonymous delivery boy stands four-square to the house, back to the camera, drawing the woman of the house out of the front door for the first time in the film.

**34** Joan Crawford, at least, who was something of an expert in interior design makeovers and the serial husbands who justify them, saw some connection between herself and Harriet Craig, buying the rights for a 1950 remake, directed by Vincent Sherman, in which she took on the now-title role.

Standing on the cusp of the house in her monogrammed housecoat, Harriet, now technically an abandoned wife, signs for the telegram before reentering a home that is no longer a conjugal space. Neglecting to close the door of this newly-defined house, the estranged wife becomes vulnerable to anything that blows in from outside, which in Harriet's case is the woman next door.

What happens next has been the subject of much critical conjecture. According to Julia Lesage, Harriet is left materially 'well off' by the departure of her husband and emotionally enriched by the receipt of a telegram informing her of her sister's death. Rather than fulfilling the conventional requirement of narrative closure, the telegram that ushers in the final scene opens up the female protagonist to 'emotional life through the direct and cathartic experience of grief'.<sup>35</sup> Emphasizing that moment when the statue that is Mrs Craig throughout most of the film slowly begins to weep, Lesage points out that Harriet 'has for a neighbor a warm, sympathetic widow', who at this point stops by 'to leave off flowers and thus hears about the sister's death'. Although 'previously rejected' by Harriet as an unwelcome intrusion in her house, 'with the breakdown of her previous, rigid domestic routine, the film's final mise-en-scène leaves it open for us to assume that the neighbor, an emotionally willing source of support, will return'.<sup>36</sup> Entirely imaginary, the scene of womanly empathy anticipated by Lesage is then thematically aligned with the companionate relationship previously established between Miss Austen and Mrs Harold, as if all relationships between women were comparable. This assumed continuum of same-sex connection seems at odds with the way *Craig's Wife* determinedly keeps the older women's oblique partnership separate and different in kind from any relationship Harriet achieves with another women, be it her sister or her niece, let alone a female neighbour she has previously imagined to be flirting with her husband. Writing from the perspective of lesbian studies, Mayne similarly accepts that the arrival of the neighbour in the final scene represents Harriet's 'one last chance at connection with another human being', interpreting the ending of the film as leaving open possibilities – presumably including erotic possibilities – for female bonding.<sup>37</sup> Linking the 'potential coupling' between Harriet and Mrs Frazier with the 'distinctly not heterosexual' relationship established between the maiden aunt and the widowed housekeeper, Mayne goes further than Lesage in neglecting to mention the not insignificant point that Mrs Frazier withdraws from the house having failed to obtain any sentient response from the visibly distracted Harriet.<sup>38</sup> In a reading of the film that is otherwise intensely tuned to the nuances of mise-en-scene, Mayne implies that Mrs Frazier, who has withdrawn from sight, remains in the house with Harriet, although her offscreen departure is signalled by the front door closing, the exact mechanism which earlier signals Walter's conclusive departure from the marital home: 'Whatever else one might say about the conclusion of the film, when

35 Lesage, 'The hegemonic female fantasy', p. 90.

36 Ibid.

37 Mayne, *Directed by Dorothy Arzner*, p. 123.

38 Ibid., p. 124.

39 Ibid., p. 130.

40 For an account of how well suited the genre is to hosting lesbian sentiment in oblique ways, see Patricia White, *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), pp. 94–135.

virtually everyone except Harriet and Mrs Frazier have been evacuated from the house, one thing remains true – the chance to sustain and extend a conversation among women has finally been made possible'.<sup>39</sup>

Arzner's film makes clear, however, that if that conversation between women is to take place, never mind take on a sexual aspect, the one place in which it can never straightforwardly occur is the screen setting of domestic melodrama.<sup>40</sup> While Arzner has the technical capacity to reanimate the cold-as-stone wife with the simple device of an extended soft-focus closeup, she does not yet have scenic access to the lesbian story except by suggesting everything the heterosexual set cannot contain. That should not lessen our interest in Arzner's renovations of domestic melodrama and its associated narrative forms, renovations that begin at the level of the homosexually designed set and end in entirely speculative lesbian scenes. In the last moments of *Craig's Wife*, when the generic aspects of melodrama assert closural dominance over the rigorously unsentimental mise-en-scene supplied by Haines's glamorously stylized heterosexual set, Harriet Craig finds herself trapped in a space that is not of her making. But Miss Austen and Mrs Harold, two female companions better practised in evading the restrictions of narrative closure, are already safely exiled to a homosocial somewhere that has still to find its exemplary scenic space in the way that heterosexuality lays cinematic claim to the home.

## Lesbian minor cinema

PATRICIA WHITE

1 Patricia White, B. Ruby Rich, Eric O. Clarke, and Richard Fung, 'Queer publicity: a dossier on lesbian and gay film festivals', *GLQ* 5 (1999), pp. 73–93; 'Queer film and video festival forum, take one: curators speak out', *GLQ*, vol. 11, no. 4 (2005), pp. 579–603; 'Queer film and video festival forum, take two: critics speak out', *GLQ*, vol. 12, no. 4 (2006), pp. 605–7.

2 B. Ruby Rich's essay was published in both the *Village Voice* and *Sight and Sound*, and the latter included responses from a number of filmmakers and programmers. See B. Ruby Rich, 'Homo pmo: the new queer cinema', Pratibha Parmar, 'Queer questions: a response to B. Ruby Rich', and Amy Taubin, 'Queer male cinema and feminism', all reprinted in Pam Cook and Philip Dodd (eds), *Women and Film: a Sight and Sound Reader* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1993), pp. 164–79. See also Michele Aaron (ed.), *New Queer Cinema: a Critical Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), especially Anat Pick, 'New queer cinema and lesbian films', pp. 103–18.

As both programmers of lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender (LGBT) film festivals and a certain percentage of their attendees will acknowledge, the lesbian feature film is the most persistently elusive of programming elements. Of course curators have other urgent desiderata: formally challenging work, work by people of colour and from underrepresented nations, transgender films.<sup>1</sup> But the lesbian feature 'problem' goes to the very structure and philosophy of such events. It is a size thing. There is always 'another gay movie' to consider for the prime, feature-film-driven programming slots, and plenty of opening and closing night and centrepiece contenders, but the number of feature films by and about lesbians, though increasing, still lags behind, in correlation with the minority percentage of women feature filmmakers. Indeed, since B. Ruby Rich's designation of New Queer Cinema in 1991, critics have noted that restricted access to feature filmmaking, and thus theatrical exhibition, along gender, race, class and language lines, significantly skewed the sample and even neutralized the concept.<sup>2</sup>

If lesbians are rarely either subjects or authors of major motion picture events, we have nevertheless deployed the *minor* in a range of culturally successful ways. If major is to minor as film is to video, feature to short, cinema to television, fiction to documentary, women – and thus lesbians and often transpeople – tend to labour in the latter category of each of these pairs. Certainly, plenty of work by lesbian, bisexual and trans filmmakers with no pretensions to mainstreaming is featured at festivals. A great deal of it is minor in the sense of ephemeral – made expressly for the festival networks – and this includes the rapidly rising number of cases in which digital video technology has enabled filmmakers to extend

3 For the purposes of my argument, a 'feature' has some commercial or theatrical exhibition potential outside the festival networks. One attempt to archive the remarkable cultural phenomenon of production motivated by festivals is the Outfest Legacy Collection at the University of California, Los Angeles.

the length of works that otherwise fall short of theatrical feature film status.<sup>3</sup> But if there is still a paucity of viable lesbian features, there are also lesbian works that deploy a certain 'poverty' – in terms of means of production or aesthetic approach – in order to deflect audience demand for familiar stories, happy endings, repeatable pleasures, identity assurances. Although such practices do not and should not circumscribe the field of audiovisual work by and about lesbians, they enact the intersection of authorship and audience, form and subject matter, and desire and identification in crucial ways.

Chantal Akerman and Sadie Benning are affiliated with disparate traditions (European 'political modernism' or subsidized art cinema and US no-budget riot grrl and dyke punk video) and generations (1970s and 1990s); yet they both work in this mode. The undeniable significance of these lesbian 'auteurs' corresponds, in different ways, to an embrace of the insignificant – stillness, sparseness, solitude – in works marked by a refusal of conventional formats. Akerman's *Portrait d'une jeune fille de la fin des années 60 à Bruxelles/Portrait of a Young Girl at the End of the 60s in Brussels* (1994) and Benning's *Flat Is Beautiful* (1998) – a portrait of an even younger, even less-comfortable-as-a-girl girl in 1980s Milwaukee, clock in at a little under an hour each. Their length, and their relatively impoverished relations of production, spare formal language and thematic concern with the liminal sexual and gender identities of their young female protagonists, actively engage the process of exclusion by the mainstream and suggest the appellation 'minor cinema'. Although both are poignant tales of girlhood self-recognition, neither of these films can adequately be described as a 'coming-out' story. They refuse predictive narratives in favour of an unrealized *potential*. Far from being stuck in a cultural moment before the 'L word' became speakable, even perversely implanted, in mainstream media, these lesbian works deliberately address past forms in order to question the present.

The term 'minor' is used here in reference, but not in strict allegiance, to the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and in particular to their monograph, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*. In their remarkably generative formulation, 'a minor literature doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language'.<sup>4</sup> Kafka writes in German, which for Prague Jews 'is a deterritorialized language, appropriate for strange and minor uses'.<sup>5</sup> Both the language and the people who speak it are displaced in different ways. As a study of a canonical writer, Deleuze and Guattari's text goes against the received idea of minor literature as a trivial practice, often implicitly gendered and/or associated with women's, children's or regional literatures and marginal genres. Indeed, for the philosophers, 'minor no longer designates specific literatures but the revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature'.<sup>6</sup> This definition of 'minor' resonates with 'queer', another term that inflects rather than opposes the dominant, one that

4 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1975), trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 16.

5 Ibid., p. 17.

6 Ibid., p. 18.

7 Ibid., p. 17.

8 On Benning's Pixelvision work, see: Mia Carter, 'The politics of pleasure: cross-cultural autobiographic performance in the video works of Sadie Benning', *Signs*, vol. 23, no. 3 (1993), pp. 745–70; Chris Holmlund, 'When autobiography meets ethnography and girl meets girl: the "dyke docs" of Sadie Benning and Su Friedrich', in Chris Holmlund and Cynthia Fuchs (eds), *Between the Sheets, in the Streets: Queer, Lesbian, Gay documentary* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 127–48; Julianne Pidduck, 'New queer cinema and experimental video', in Aaron (ed.), *New Queer Cinema*, pp. 80–97.

'deterritorializes' sexuality and expression. 'If the writer is at the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community, this situation allows the writer all the more the possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility.'<sup>7</sup>

Akerman and Benning have both been recognized for their distinctive uses of the film and video medium respectively, for signature styles that are irreducibly related to their works' representations of isolation, waiting, longing. For Akerman, deterritorialization is both theme – in the sense of exile – and practice – the reduction of cinema to a set of formal elements (stationary medium-shot, lateral track, refusal of the reverse-shot) that alter and frame apparently realist representation. Over forty years, Akerman's career has interspersed an impressive number of feature films with shorter works for television, video documentaries and, increasingly, museum installations; these 'minor' works define her oeuvre as much as do the theatrically exhibited features. Based in the US midwest, video artist Benning, who emerged as an art star when she *was* a minor with her series of distinctive short tapes shot in Pixelvision with a child's toy camera, has not yet come out with a theatrically exhibited feature film.<sup>8</sup> Rather, she has collaborated on a couple of experimental, animated television shorts (*The Judy Spots*, with Elisabeth Subrin [1995]) and music videos, the fifty-minute, black-and-white narrative video *Flat Is Beautiful*, and, after a number of years playing in and doing artwork for the band Le Tigre, exhibited large portrait paintings, audio work and the two-channel video projection *Play Pause* (2007) in a solo show created for Ohio's Wexner Center for the Arts. Akerman is not a minor artist, as her museum shows, retrospectives, a DVD box-set and many accolades attest. And yet most commentaries characterize her work by its deliberate withholding of most of the 'tricks' of cinema. Benning has also had significant art world exposure, yet even her recent gallery work remains consistent with the modest, DIY aesthetic of her Pixelvision videos and is sustained by queer audience and institutional networks. Although Akerman's work is far less 'out' in terms of lesbian content than Benning's overtly queer, performative tapes, the artists warrant discussion together both for the formal and conceptual links I hope will emerge in my readings and for the related ways in which they inscribe a lesbian authorial persona across a body of work. My focus here is on the affinities between works by these two in some sense accidental auteurs (in the sense that neither holds herself as a source of meaning and mastery yet is inevitably invoked as a proper name). However, a number of film and video makers deploy lesbian 'minority' within more dominant screen cultures and suggest a wider critical applicability of the concept.

In Deleuze and Guattari's account of minor literature, as in many Deleuzian terms and concepts, there is a poetic, energizing force that encourages borrowings and connections; although *Kafka* is about literature and language, its emphasis on the performative and the

9 Ibid., p. xxiv.

10 Verena Conley, 'Minoritarian', in Adrian Parr (ed.), *The Deleuze Dictionary* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 167.

11 Mette Hjort, *Small Nation, Global Cinema: the New Danish Cinema* (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 2005), p. ix. See also: Chapter 6 of D.N. Rodowick, *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997); Tom Gunning, 'Toward a minor cinema', *Motion Picture*, vol. 3, nos 1–2 (1989–90); Mette Hjort 'Danish cinema and the politics of recognition', in David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (eds), *Post-Theory* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), pp. 520–32.

12 Ivone Margulies, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 16.

13 Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*, trans. Daniella Dangoor, intro. Michael Moon (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).

14 Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, p. 17.

15 Ibid., p. 18.

nonrepresentational sign invites extension to the cinema. As film theorist Dana Polan writes in his translator's introduction, their text opens 'the possibility of a micropolitics where everything is immediately and necessarily contiguous with everything else'.<sup>9</sup> The concept of 'minor cinema', understood most straightforwardly as making use of limited resources in a politicized way, has been productively elaborated in a number of contexts, from the philosophical to the pragmatic. For example, in *The Deleuze Dictionary* we learn that minor cinema is 'interested neither in representation or interpretation, but in experimentation; it is a creative act of becoming',<sup>10</sup> and in *Small Nation, Global Cinema*, Mette Hjort explains: 'The term minor points, then, to the existence of regimes of cultural power and to the need for strategic resourcefulness on the part of those who are unfavorably situated within the cultural landscape in question'.<sup>11</sup>

In *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday*, Ivone Margulies points out that the director herself identifies her practice as a 'minor cinema' in Deleuze and Guattari's terms.<sup>12</sup> Akerman has a cultural affinity with the philosophers' milieu, of course, and relates to Kafka in her austere, literal, formal modernism and in her exploration of Jewish exile and displacement. Benning's means of expression are a toy camera and childlike line drawing. As these artists' work shows, minor cinema may be produced within the major languages, not only of genre (coming of age) or national cinemas but also of such supposedly alternative formations as New Wave or independent cinemas, which they demonstrate to be equally reliant on heteronormative, individualized frames of vision. Short-format work in particular circumvents the commodity circulation and narrative boundedness of the feature film, crossing into other communities and contexts such as the festival networks I invoked above.

If 'literature' can be extended to 'cinema', 'minor' resonates with but is not a cognate for 'queer'. Queer theory has made use of Deleuze and Guattari's work since Guy Hocquenghem's *Homosexual Desire* in 1972,<sup>13</sup> and the way that 'minor literature finds itself positively charged with the role and function of collective, and even revolutionary, enunciation'<sup>14</sup> could certainly describe queer experimental cinema's challenge to majoritarian film language, narrative patterns and conditions of production. As Deleuze and Guattari summarize the connections between formal work, desire and politics: 'The three characteristics of minor literature are the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation'.<sup>15</sup> It is this felt immediacy that rings out in the demands of film festival audiences and that makes LGBT-produced media such an urgent, and intensely debated, collective endeavour. The 'assemblage' is not a consumer demographic but a reciprocal set of alliances traversed by desire and politics.

Rather than aligning the minor with queer cinema *tout court*, I confine my discussion to specific films. Moreover, I modify minor with lesbian

16 Ibid, p. 19.

17 For an influential critique, see Alice Jardine, 'Deleuze and his br[other]s', *Sub-stance*, vol. 13, nos 3–4 (1984), pp. 46–60. In relation to the 'minor,' see Dana Polan, 'Translator's introduction', in Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, p. xxvi.

18 Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, p. 27.

19 Alison Butler, *Women's Cinema: the Contested Screen* (London: Wallflower Press, 2005), p. 19.

20 Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, p. 22.

and hope thereby to bring forward the gendered (and pejorative) associations with the former term – the implication of the substandard, the trivialized, the dismissed, the real chance that minor work expresses not only a 'willed poverty'<sup>16</sup> but also underfunding. Through this conjunction I hope to emphasize the materiality of the minor and to keep in play dimensions of gendered sexuality and subjectivity that are not obviously compatible with Deleuze and Guattari's anti-identitarian models of flux or with reflexive uses of queer. The feminist critique of the valorization of 'becoming-woman' in Deleuze and Guattari is a powerful one. Not to stray too far from their vocabulary, the deterritorialization signaled by this term for the male subject represents the displacement of the female.<sup>17</sup> (Similarly, in *Kafka*, the project to 'find points of nonculture or underdevelopment, linguistic Third World zones'<sup>18</sup> designated by 'becoming-minor' feels like a form of divestiture that depends upon initial privilege.) Yet many feminists have mobilized Deleuzian concepts of becoming in affirmative ways. Most notable for my purposes is Alison Butler's persuasive assertion in her fine study *Women's Cinema: the Contested Screen* that: 'the plurality of forms, concerns and constituencies in contemporary women's cinema now exceeds even the most flexible definition of counter-cinema. Women's cinema now seems 'minor' rather than oppositional.'<sup>19</sup> Whereas 'women's cinema' may be envisioned from a feminist social space, it is reductive to confine it there. Ironically, the nomination 'minor cinema' accounts for the *expansion* of women's filmmaking globally and transmedially.

Drawing on Meaghan Morris's comments, Butler argues quite compellingly for conceiving of women's cinema as minor cinema in Deleuze and Guattari's sense: 'women's cinema is not "at home" in any of the host cinematic or national discourses it inhabits, but . . . is always an inflected mode, incorporating, reworking and contesting the conventions of established traditions'.<sup>20</sup> This formulation offers an intriguing approach to women's cinema and a useful parallel to addressing the debates about the assimilation of New Queer Cinema – which is no longer clearly new or oppositional – that I alluded to in my opening discussion of the value accorded the theatrical feature. Butler's formulation also enables one to connect lesbian practice to women's cinema (as one among a 'plurality of constituencies') without 'reterritorializing' it under the sign of the feminine. Yet linking or analogizing 'women's' (or 'queer') with 'minor' immediately invokes a collectivity that I am arguing these lesbian filmmakers, as a minority within a minority (whether queers, women or lesbian filmmakers), only reach for through a deliberately singular practice.

Rather than modifying all women's, or even all lesbian, cinema with the still in-some-contexts self-defeating term minor, my readings attend to the aesthetic transformations of particular texts in which reduced means (short, low-budget or small-gauge formats, minimal narrative and sets) become signature authorial practices, ways of inscribing desire. My

21 Ibid., p. 17.

22 In *Kafka*, Deleuze and Guattari see 'a becoming-child of the adult taking place in the adult, a becoming-adult of the child taking place in the child, the two in contiguity' (p. 79). In contrast, Lee Edelman critiques 'a political order that returns to the Child as the image of the future' in his *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 3.

interest in how authorship marks enunciation, while not incompatible with Deleuze and Guattari's approach – *Kafka* is, among other things, an author study – also emphasizes formations of desire that are bound up with subjectivity in ways that they do not consider. Minor literature's 'cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics',<sup>21</sup> write Deleuze and Guattari, and although I do not claim political transparency for these films, I suggest it is through the authorship that is signaled by their autobiographical and formal elements that the work achieves collective implications.

Finally, as I have indicated, lesbian minor cinema is about minors – the teenage and pre-teen heroines of Akerman's and Benning's films display irresolution and lack of power even as they are figures of desire and becoming.<sup>22</sup> The distinction of *lesbian* minority is thematized through particular representations of the juvenile that mark the marginalization of lesbian in relation to a series of terms including gay, women, feminist, queer. Instead of giving a retrospective coherence to a past experience as a more conventional narrative would do, these modest films drift along with their inarticulate protagonists, moving the viewer in the process.

Chantal Akerman's substantial yet minimalist oeuvre is exilic and agoraphobic by turns. It includes films about hotels, subways, apartments; it records travels in *D'est* (1993, about Eastern Europe) or *De l'autre côté* (2002, about the US–Mexican border), sojourns in *Là-bas* (2006, shot in Tel Aviv) and 'cramped spaces' from *La Chambre* (1972) to *La Captive* (2000), but always breaks out of these frames; she has made more than one film about moving out, and her debut short film is memorably titled *Blow Up My Town/Saute ma ville* (1968). It is understandable that Akerman relates Deleuze and Guattari's definition of minor literature to her position; she is Belgian in Paris, Jewish and the daughter of refugees, a lesbian in the *cinéma d'auteurs*. The characteristics they enumerate in *Kafka* – exile, the refusal of metaphor, an arid style, a refusal to hierarchize the small incident and the eventful – also mark her work. The most explicitly modernist of lesbian filmmakers and least at home in the LGBT film festivals, Akerman is a major figure whose embrace of the minor traces a route through identity politics and commercial demands that offers an interesting precedent to contemporary figures who enter filmmaking from different points. Looking at Akerman's short and early films multiplies sites of authorial and spectatorial inscription. It also calls attention to what could be seen as either an enviable flexibility in the European production context within which she works or as a familiar consignment of women artists to less capably intensive forms of film production like television commissions, short-format and small-gauge work.

Akerman's status as a female auteur within the influential cinematic political modernism of the 1970s and as an icon within feminist theoretical interrogations of film language makes her relationship to the 'queer' cinema that decisively emerged in the 1990s a rather curious one.

23 Chantal Akerman interview in Angela Martin, 'Chantal Akerman's films: a dossier,' *Feminist Review*, no. 3 (1979), p. 28.

24 See in a related context, Amy Villarejo's discussion of lesbian filmmaker Ulrike Ottinger's 'non lesbian' documentary *Exile Shanghai: Lesbian Rule: Cultural Criticism and the Value of Desire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

25 Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archives of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

26 Judith Mayne makes a similar point, connecting the film to Akerman's short *J'ai faim, j'ai froid* (1984) in her lovely reading of the film, 'Girl talk', in *Framed: Lesbians, Feminists, and Media Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp. 179–92.

She is one of the few lesbian filmmakers with multiple feature films to their credit, and her work certainly foregrounds the formal innovation that queer cinema advocates. Yet besides the raw and still unmatched sex scene in her first feature-length film *Jet tu il elle* (1974), the lesbian content of her work is rarely apparent enough to warrant inclusion in LGBT festivals. As Margulies has detailed, the filmmaker's 'hyperrealist everyday' does not easily fit a group designation. A statement like, 'I am not making women's films; I am making Chantal Akerman's films' – however disheartening to feminist film scholars eager to claim her – arguably reaches beyond the platitudes of artistic integrity or the wiliness of brand promotion to a principled position on identity politics.<sup>23</sup> 'Chantal Akerman's films' are inflected, not determined, by gender, generation, Jewishness, nationality, feminism and queerness.<sup>24</sup>

Her 1994 *Portrait of a Young Girl at the End of the 60s in Brussels* represents for me an unforgettable convergence between a 'minor' institutional form – the television commission – and a deliberate use of the minor, that is youthful, subject. In one sense, the film describes a (literal) line of flight; its heroine runs away. In the first scene, during the early morning hours, the young girl of the title, Michèle, takes money from her father's wallet. After he drops her off at the station, she goes to a cafe instead of school and writes ever more dramatic sicknotes to explain her absence: 'her uncle died'; 'her father died'; 'she died'. Yet as much as the character's smile as she speaks indicates a moment of becoming, the line also registers violence. Like an avatar of the filmmaker, Michèle awaits animation by the film's aesthetic rendering of a fairly unexceptional experience of first love and self-recognition. Michèle does not run very far, because her best friend and love object Danielle remains at school. Far from the alienated youth of popular culture – seen in a film such as Catherine Hardwicke's *Thirteen* (2003), with its frenetic, intimidating depiction of the interdependency between girl friends – Michèle seems rather to embody what Ann Cvetkovich calls 'the everyday life of queer trauma'.<sup>25</sup> In the course of the film she will befriend a young French army deserter at the movies, lose her virginity (implied in an ellipsis), rendezvous with Danielle and, in the final image, walk alone at dawn towards the frame's vanishing point.

It is notable that *Portrait of a Young Girl*, the Akerman film that made the LGBT festival rounds during the rise of New Queer Cinema, revisits her own 'juvenilia'.<sup>26</sup> Linking *Saute ma ville*'s setting and *Je tu il elle*'s structurally restrained yet emotionally chaotic representation of adolescent lesbian passion, *Portrait of a Young Girl* is a kind of remake of both early films, presenting a protagonist who physically resembles the filmmaker and whose youth decentres her relation to power and desire. Thus within a wide-ranging oeuvre, Akerman's return to a specific situation (albeit in what might be considered one of her 'minor' works) represents more than a thematic concern with girlhood, it signifies rather an interest in the 'minor' as an open-ended, unfinished state. A sense of being stuck, and of simultaneously being nowhere, pervades

**27** The film is not in DVD distribution. The scene I discuss below is included in *Chantal Akerman by Chantal Akerman* (1997), from the Arte television series *Cinéma, de notre temps*, and released on DVD.

these representations of youth and longing. Girlhood is not incorporated into an even line of developmental growth or offered as a nostalgic backstory.

*Portrait of a Young Girl* is Akerman's contribution to the French television series, *Tous les garçons et les filles de leur âge/All the Boys and Girls of Their Age*, commissioned by Arte, of nine, hour-long programmes in which filmmakers were asked to render the period of their youth in part by drawing on the era's music.<sup>27</sup> Akerman's film is at once autobiographical and circumspect; its title is generic in subject, 'a young girl', but specific in place, Brussels. Just below the title appears a small caption that gives us the specific time as well – April 1968. Thus the film's place and time evoke Paris, May 68 – a place and time whose massive student-led strikes function as a mythical origin story in narratives of the new left, poststructuralist theory and film culture – by virtue of being not quite Paris, not yet May. If the film makes no attempt to disguise that it is filmed in present-day Brussels, it may be because its girl's own story is not given meaning by the heroic (male) politics that would require historical authenticity. The protagonist, Michèle, seems stranded, bored, at one point mustering a half-hearted anti-Vietnam war chant. Part of the film's poignancy as a not-quite coming-out story is the absence of reference to the era's emerging feminist and gay social movements. A minor, Michèle does not connect with the idea of political minorities.

It is from this position of not quite, not yet, that Akerman rewrites the major language of the French New Wave of the 1960s. Each segment of the television series includes an obligatory party scene. Akerman responds to the letter of the commission while deflecting its homogenizing potential (with 'boys and girls' having both anti-sexist and heteronormative valences) in a rendition of the rituals of teenage heterosexuality that makes the perspective of a queer youth as devastatingly central as, yet much more restrained than, the culminating prom scene in Brian DePalma's *Carrie* (1976). In Akerman's penultimate scene, Michèle and Danielle arrive at the party. Their separation at the film's end has, however, been prefigured. Michèle's tryst with the boy from the cinema prepares the gesture that will conclude the film, as decisive as the one with which Michèle began the fateful day: she will send Danielle to Paul, cutting herself off from, yet controlling, their story.

To the sound of Trini Lopez's version of *La Bamba*, the party scene cuts in abruptly as the teenagers circle, arm in arm, to the left around Danielle, who chooses Michèle to join her as a dance partner in the middle of the circle. When Danielle rejoins the circle, the scene cuts to a medium closeup of Michèle. She looks worried as she scans the crowd, then her face lights up. As she turns her head to choose, the film cuts to Michèle stepping up to . . . Danielle. There is a beat or two of tension as her friend rejoins her within the circle, then Danielle flashes a reassuring smile. But when the anthem ends and the swirling overture to James

Brown's 'It's a Man's, Man's, Man's World' starts up, the circle immediately breaks down, a tall boy cuts between the girls and sweeps Danielle into his arms. Michèle just stands there, perfectly still amidst the slow-dancers, her face held in closeup as she feels and thinks. Finally she turns and walks out into the night.

Not since Max Ophüls's films has *la ronde* or the relay of desire and lack been so dizzyingly or economically rendered. Akerman's characteristic exclusion of a point-of-view shot (which would show the couple dancing), here brilliantly conveys precisely the point-of-view of exclusion, even as the camera remains trapped with Michèle within the circle of teens. We are given only three shots of the scene, and Michèle remains their focus: the first follows her as she circles in the chain, watching Danielle unobserved, and then reveals the even greater pleasure of being chosen; in the second, stationary shot she withstands the scrutiny of others as she moves to declare her own choice; in the third, duration is used to relay Michèle's palpable emotion at being passed over back to Akerman's signature, respectful authorial observation. Negotiating the delegation of the gaze in a way radically different from classical cinema's almost transitive uses (subject looks at and thereby acts upon object), Akerman's camera finds its anchor in a spinning, desiring and above all gazing surrogate. The signifying effects of diegetic sound – for example, of footsteps as the girls move through the streets – have been so built up across the film that the song's clichéd lyrics (the cliché of the song) are deafening. By virtue of its deterritorialization of cinema's audiovisual codes, the film shows how they construct that taken-for-granted man's world as surely as do the patriarchal family, the school and pop music, the targets of the film's internal critique.

Circé, the young actress who plays Michèle, bears a physical resemblance to the young Akerman in stance and presence. Akerman also appears in *Saute ma ville* – as a manic young woman who comes home to her high-rise apartment, cooks herself some spaghetti and finally takes a match to the gas before a final freeze-frame is accompanied by the sound of the explosion implied by the title. The later film is thus a less fatalistic revision of that first portrait of a young girl at the end of the 1960s in Brussels. But *Portrait of a Young Girl*, with its lovesick lesbian protagonist, is also a (less sexually explicit) revision of *Je tu il elle*, made when Akerman was in her early twenties. The filmmaker later remarked about casting herself in that film, with its nudity and still remarkable lesbian sex scene: 'When I did it . . . I didn't have a relation with the public. . . . I wouldn't dare do that again – I was completely unaware of how strong it would appear.'<sup>28</sup> *Portrait of a Young Girl* finds a way to 'do it again', but differently. The film's story of an almost unbearable schoolgirl crush hints at how a 'strong' lesbian representation such as that found in *Je tu il elle* might follow from the gesture of directorial and adolescent self-definition made in *Saute ma ville*. In other words, it shows how a young girl at the end of the 1960s in Brussels came to make

28 Martin, 'Chantal Akerman's films', p. 30.

29 Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, p. 17.

30 Margulies, *Nothing Happens*, p. 1.

31 Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, p. 85.

32 See 'The *Boys Don't Cry* debate', in Jackie Stacey and Sarah Street (eds), *Queer Screen: a Screen Reader* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 257–95.

'Chantal Akerman's films' and to establish through them a unique and renewable relation with a 'public' itself still in the making.

In minor literature, 'the individual concern . . . becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it'.<sup>29</sup> In the direct address, personal narration and physical presence of the artist in Benning's *Me and Rubyfruit* (1989) and *It Wasn't Love* (1990) and Jennifer Montgomery's *Age 12: Love with a Little L* (1991), in the casting of younger actors as versions of themselves in these two artists' longer works *Flat Is Beautiful* and *Art for Teachers of Children* (1995), and in Su Friedrich's hour-long docudrama about baby dykes, *Hide and Seek* (1996), one detects a remarkable formal consistency. These works help define lesbian minor cinema in terms of format (the short or short feature shot on 16 mm, 8 mm or analogue video), a 'de-aestheticization' (black-and-white or hand-processed) comparable to Akerman's minimalism, and the inchoate sexual and gender identities of their young female-bodied protagonists. These films and tapes do not belong to a 'coming out' genre; although they deal with the interstitial moments between childhood and adolescence or adolescence and adulthood, they are inconclusive and liminal, youth is not universalized, lesbianism is not affirmed. Resisting commodification or authorization by categories such as lesbian chic or New Queer Cinema, they share commonalities that do not cancel out their particularities. Margulies opens her study with a quote from Akerman: 'I haven't tried to find a compromise between myself and others. I have thought that the more particular I am the more I address the general.'<sup>30</sup> Akerman's 'minoritizing' queerness thus paradoxically links her singular vision to that of these other artists in what Deleuze and Guattari call a 'collective assemblage of enunciation'.<sup>31</sup> In this view, the modest quality of the works of these artists need not consign them to the ephemeral.

Such films can be connected and contrasted with such breakthrough lesbian independent films of the same period as Maria Maggenti's *The Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love* (1995), Alex Sichel's *All Over Me* (1997), or even Kimberly Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) – fine first features that also depict girls' culture but which, to a greater or lesser degree, are expressed in 'major' languages involving narrative incident, structures of revelation and denouement and genre formulae.<sup>32</sup> A critical approach to what I call lesbian minor cinema reaches beyond the thematics of girlhood to stylistic features and material issues – limitations in the means of production intensify the effects of formal choices. The very title *Flat Is Beautiful* suggests a strategy of deterritorialization that also fits the cheap, analogue media in which the work is produced. Benning's (mostly) video work has an almost serial quality that, like Akerman's 'remakes' of earlier films, keeps open a space that the more familiar kinds of repetition delivered by lesbian feature films consumed in the art-house cineplex might close off.

Though at a very different stage of her career than Akerman, Benning has been making work for fifteen years and one can detect similar

elements of mediation of her earlier work, self-representation and 'relation to the public'. Benning's ten early tapes made with the Fisher Price camera produced highly contrasted, pixellated and *flat* images. These short, achingly resonant depictions of adolescent angst and insight feature extreme closeups of Benning's face speaking in synch sound and direct address, handwritten or pasted-up texts and astutely selected and affectively charged shards of popular culture – music, film and television clips, objects, tabloid headlines and other texts. Played out in her bedroom in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where she lived with her mother, the tapes are infinitely resourceful yet infused with a longing to take off; they show a baby dyke creatively, anxiously marking time. The last of this series of works, *Girlpower Part I* (1992), was billed as the forerunner to an independent feature, but this film was abandoned. *Flat Is Beautiful* remains her longest work, and while it maps terrain familiar from the Pixelvision tapes, the notable difference is that Benning herself does not appear. Instead, *Flat is Beautiful* incorporates graphic representations in the form of crudely constructed masks and animation (figures 1 and 2). In *Play Pause* and other recent short video pieces, a similar naive drawing style is used as the exclusive means of visual representation (the audio mixes of recorded ambient sounds and guitar chords are also crucial), continuing an abstraction of human form and of the subject at the centre of the earlier work while serving as a literal form of inscription (drawing).

*Flat Is Beautiful* is set in a poor Milwaukee neighbourhood in the mid 1980s, the scene of Benning's adolescence and inevitably read as the scene of her early filmmaking. If the man's world of teen romance and pop culture clichés exclude Akerman's Michèle, it is exclusion itself that renders her a powerful figure of the filmmaker's position and sensibility. Benning's *Flat is Beautiful* is a similarly heartbreaking depiction of an 'odd girl out', this time a twelve-year-old in gender trouble. Taylor (played by Sammy Steele) and all of the tape's other characters wear oversized handmade masks drawn in thick black marker; their crude but touching features and stiff hairdos echo the high-contrast presentation of Benning's own face in the Pixelvision tapes. Yet the topography characterized in Benning's early works by her tightly framed



33 'Toy stories: Sadie Benning interviewed by Gavin Smith', *Film Comment*, vol. 34, no. 6 (1998), p. 30.

physiognomy, a space flattened by the Pixelvision camera's close range and fixed focus, expands in *Flat Is Beautiful* to exteriors, shot in black-and-white 16 mm, of the sparsely populated streets of a midwestern, mid-1980s neighbourhood in decline. (*Play Pause* continues this trend, consisting of line drawings of a cityscape peopled with human figures but no discernible main characters, though a few figures come to the forefront in a central gay bar sequence.) Stationary, frontal medium long-shots depict abandoned storefronts, murals and hand-lettered shop signs; tighter shots indoors, rendered in Pixelvision's frank, foreshortened stare, show the mass-produced objects that fill Taylor's world and her dreams: a Hungry Man-brand TV-dinner placed in the microwave, the cartoon *Jem and the Holograms* flickering on the television, a tapping foot clad in an Adidas Samba, an Atari game. Placed and dated, these images are concretized rather than metaphoric.

The actors too become puppet-like, their everyday interactions are defamiliarized; affect is flattened and at the same time strangely heightened by the unchanging expressions of the masks. A single mom pushes potato chips wearily through her mouth slot. 'I wanted to create a world that was constructed so that it was fake but also kind of real at the same time, because that's kind of how life is,' Benning explains.<sup>33</sup> Even Benning's quite ambitious expansion of her characteristic short format marks a simultaneous turn towards the minor: the protagonist is younger, much less empowered and less articulate than the 'Sadie' who narrates videos such as *Me and Rubyfruit*. *Flat Is Beautiful*'s length makes it a not-quite feature, and, although scripted, it is in fact not particularly 'dramatic'. Instead, it consists of all the in-between times – and that is about all there is – in the life of a fifth-grade latchkey kid. Events, such as they are – Taylor is rejected by her friend Julie, who does not like the teasing they are subjected to at school; gets her period for the first time when she is home alone ('what am I going to do?'); has a nightmare and is comforted by her mother; confides to their gay roommate she likes girls – transpire and are processed with the impoverished vocabulary of an eleven-year-old. The phone call from Taylor's best friend Julie is a sing-song argument rather than a melodramatic disclosure: 'You're not a boy you know'. 'What am I then?' 'You're a girl!' 'No I'm not!' The emphasis on the temporal in-between is a poignant correlate of the 'in-between' status of Taylor's age and gender.

After Taylor retreats to her room, her reverie is rendered in an animated sequence (resembling the technique of *The Judy Spots*) in which a cutout figure of Taylor practising the guitar is juxtaposed with drawings of figures that seem to represent Taylor and Julie kissing, eyes from which tears fall or stars spin, and images clipped from magazines and packaging, most of them graphic rather than photographic – a comic-book heterosexual couple, a kung fu figure, a bike, a pack of BubbleYum. Taylor's dreams of love and loss are mediated by popular culture, at once heterosexualized and creatively gendered. A magical array of images figures her own liminal identity, linking the 'flat' of a

tomboy's chest to the aesthetic possibilities of cutout animation, the two-dimensional television/video game screen, and the useful ambiguity, the literal sketchiness, of drawing. Of course Benning employs this ambiguity in the masks themselves; the fact that equally inexpressive cutout animation is used in this sequence for a representation of interiority invites us to find the beauty in the surface, not the depth. Strangely thing-like renditions of people call attention, in turn, to what are otherwise banal objects, bringing them to life here and throughout the tape, with its shots of a companionably dripping tap or an unattended television set.

Taylor's object-companions retain their magic, even as childhood wanes, through Benning's camera. The reverie scene can be read as a revisiting of Benning's earlier videos, set in her room, in which another toy, the Fisher Price camera, was used to animate her own face. Through *Flat Is Beautiful*, the closeup intimacy of those extraordinary tapes can be understood as Benning keeping herself company, consoling herself. The direct address of the videos meets a similarly isolated viewer in a space that is separate yet shared. Poet Eileen Myles describes the course of Benning's work: 'Everyone was staring at Sadie when she was a kid. Trying to figure out what sex she was. So she just went and made her own famelful representation. Initially she kind of joined the staring people and her camera was staring at her but then it started moving around, and slowly she began to replace herself . . .'<sup>34</sup> *Flat Is Beautiful*, like *Portrait of a Young Girl*, can thus also be read as marking the emergence of the author ('A gay teen decides to stay home from school and make her *own* world'<sup>35</sup>), but without endowing her with 'authority' or control. In the oeuvres of both Benning and Akerman, recent works that seem to be less explicit portraits of lesbian adolescence are connected to earlier, seemingly more explicit authorial performances. Rather than simply filling in autobiographical gaps, these works keep open the potential of the 'minor', linking youth with the refusal of closure (reterritorialization) by eschewing depictions of definitive 'events' and inviting a spectatorial participation that is not reducible to identification and catharsis.

In the scene I analyzed from *Portrait of a Young Girl*, Akerman renders Michèle's crush, and her being crushed, through the social isolation of the dance; Benning expresses the much younger Taylor's feelings through a representation of interiority and isolation anchored in social, mass-mediated images. In contrast to James Browns's 'It's a Man's, Man's, Man's World', which emblemizes Michèle's status as lesbian outcast, this character's disappointment has do-it-yourself guitar accompaniment that signifies the riot grrl movement on the historical horizon. Yet the two films' protagonists share a profound aloneness that is communicated to viewers through intensification of the crude, even minor (in the sense of banal, hardly noteworthy) signifiers of the adolescent crush.

Given the distancing mechanisms employed in both works, it is interesting that our participation in baby-dyke pathos depends on the closeup, whether of mask and cutouts or of Michèle's stoic face. For me

34 Eileen Myles, *Sadie Benning: Suspended Animation* (Columbus, OH: Wexner Center for the Arts, 2007), p. 16.

35 Ibid.

36 Amy Taubin, 'Teen spirit', *The Village Voice*, 14 January 1997, p. 70.

37 Béla Balázs, *Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of a New Art*, trans. Edith Bone (New York, NY: Dover, 1970); Gertrud Koch and Miriam Hansen, 'Béla Balázs: the physiognomy of things', *New German Critique*, no. 40 (1987), pp. 167–77.

38 'Toy stories', p. 29.

39 Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, p. 158.

these shots are not primarily about identification with the protagonists' subjectivity or interiority; they keep us at a distance even as they address us. As Amy Taubin writes of the closeup of Michèle: 'To the degree that this . . . film is autobiographical, we are watching Chantal Akerman at the moment she discovers her vocation as a filmmaker'.<sup>36</sup> In *Flat is Beautiful*, it is a closeup of objects that introduce an equivalent representation of subjective recognition. The pan over the figurines on Taylor's dresser foreshadows the animated objects in Taylor's reverie to follow; Benning's camera emphasizes what film theorist Béla Balázs, in his paean to the closeup, called 'the physiognomy of things'.<sup>37</sup> But if Balázs looked for the soul in the closeup, Benning and Akerman are doing something different by making the surface opaque.

Responding to critic and programmer Gavin Smith's question about her use of the device of masks in *Flat is Beautiful*, Benning says:

I was influenced by Chantal Akerman's films – the actors almost feel like they're wearing masks some of the time because their facial expressions don't change. I wanted to evoke that, but also other things – the mask is a metaphor for wanting to know what's going on underneath. And in relationship to the ambiguity of Taylor's gender, this split between the head being a cartoon and the body being real makes the audience more attuned to body language.

GS: For me the masks actually facilitate a deeper emotional response.

SB: That's true also in cartoons. Cartoons use animals and hybrid human animal characters . . . but children relate to them almost more than they would to real people. Children relate to cartoons as something that is for them, and in some ways I wanted to make an adult version.<sup>38</sup>

For Benning, the ambiguity of gender, spread over the head/body split, makes the body hyperreal; the hybridity of human/animal doubles that of boy/girl. Her desire to make an adult version of a cartoon could be thought of as a literal form of minoritization. Kafka's hybrid human-animals are an important example of 'becoming' in Deleuze and Guattari's analysis: 'There is no longer man or animal since each deterritorializes the other, in a conjunction of flux, in a continuum of reversible intensities'.<sup>39</sup> Here, becoming-animal is a way of refusing anthropomorphism and escaping repressive, oedipalized notions of personhood.

But Benning's more mundane interest in 'the mask as a metaphor for wanting to know what's going on underneath' is where she parts company with the French thinkers. For conflict over oedipalized destiny is central to this film and to Akerman's *Portrait of a Young Girl*, suggesting how minority depictions can engage, without faithfully reproducing, major tropes and identity narratives (a chapter of *Kafka* is called 'An exaggerated Oedipus'). *Flat Is Beautiful* movingly depicts Taylor's extremely close relationship with her struggling single mother,

Peggy, eloquently condensing the precariousness of mother–daughter intimacy when Peggy tries to comfort her daughter by introducing the topic of *Bambi*, somehow forgetting about that film’s traumatic depiction of the mother’s death. Taylor seeks affirmation from the family’s gay roommate Quiggy; when she confides that she thinks it is ‘great’ when he falls in love with men, she is sweetly fishing for him to say it would be great if a girl fell in love with her too. But Quiggy is moving out, like her father did, and even queer affirmation must contend with loss.

Father–daughter conflict is inscribed at the very outset of *Portrait of a Young Girl*, when Michèle forges her sicknotes. These very poignant moments indicate the limits of Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the ‘minor’ for the cinema of lesbian or queer childhood. Precisely because these protagonists *are* minors, Oedipal conflicts loom large. The arrival of Taylor’s period, her being teased at school, her losing Julie, show the costs of ‘becoming a woman’ in a way that is far from the subjectless state that Deleuze and Guattari signify through the term ‘becoming-woman’. Monique Wittig asserts that ‘the refusal to become (or remain) heterosexual always meant to refuse to become . . . a woman’.<sup>40</sup> These films explore the potential of girlhood as the state of not (yet?) becoming a woman from an enunciative position that I would describe as lesbian – despite the historical and political divide between Wittig’s era (which Akerman and Deleuze and Guattari shared) and Benning’s, and the possibility that Taylor might eventually find a new transgender vocabulary for her self-perception.

The much more visible lesbian presence in recent popular culture that would seem to mark the difference between these periods has been characterized by a notable cultural shift in attitudes toward queerness in girl culture, signaled by the popularity of queer characters on US teen-oriented shows (such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*’s Willow), the box-office success of *Boys Don’t Cry*, Katy Perry’s hit song ‘I Kissed a Girl’, and even the findings of studies of teen sexual practices. Such transformations in girl culture (however commodity- and femme-oriented) arguably draw energy from the dyke punk and riot grrl subcultures from which Benning’s work emerged. The talented cadre of US lesbian filmmakers who began to make feature films in the 1990s have often keyed their work to that overlap: see, for example, Jamie Babbitt’s *But I’m A Cheerleader* (1999) and *Itty Bitty Titty Committee* (2007), Angela Robinson’s *D.E.B.S.* (2004), and Rose Troche’s work in progress, an adaptation of Ariel Schrag’s graphic novel of her junior year in high school, *Potential*.<sup>41</sup> *Flat Is Beautiful* has affinities with these works, yet, with its backward-looking settings and sensibilities, like *Portrait of a Young Girl* it refuses triumphalist narratives. Youth – minority – is not an oppositional term, but one that resides within a category, projecting a potential future even while undermining a positive state. It is this enunciation that positions a spectator in relation to both the filmmaker and her young protagonist that distinguishes lesbian minor cinema.

40 Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1992), p. 13.

41 Ariel Schrag, *Potential* (San Jose, CA: Slave Labor Graphics, 2000). See also Ariel Schrag, *Awkward and Definition: the High School Comic Chronicles of Ariel Schrag* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2008). The film reteams Troche with producer Christine Vachon, the key lesbian figure in New Queer Cinema, whose Killer Films developed Troche’s debut film with Guinevere Turner, *Go Fish* (1994), into the first significant lesbian feature of the movement. Troche, Babbitt, Robinson and Schrag have also been involved to varying degrees with the benchmark lesbian text of the noughties, Ilene Chaiken’s US premium-cable lesbian soap opera, *The L Word* (2004–). Also worth citing in the context of teen lesbian representation are the television series *South of Nowhere* (2005–) in the USA, with which Rose Troche had early creative involvement, and *Sugar Rush* (2005–06) in the UK.

<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth Freeman, 'Packing history, count(er)ing generations', *New Literary History*, vol. 31, no. 4 (2000), pp. 727–44, p. 728. Judith Halberstam citing Freeman, points to queer participation in subcultures as a form of extended adolescence, read in a positive sense as a politics of refusal. In *a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2005), p. 152. See also Elizabeth Freeman, guest ed., 'Queer temporalities', *GLQ*, vol. 13, nos 2–3 (2007).

<sup>43</sup> Freeman, 'Packing history', p. 741.

<sup>44</sup> Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 728.

In 'Packing history, count(er)ing generations', Elizabeth Freeman has eloquently described a queer displacement of generational models of history and futurity. Identifying with feminist history functions as, in Freeman's definition, a form of 'temporal drag, with all the associations that the word "drag" has with retrogression, delay, and the pull of the past upon the present', through which otherwise occluded possibilities become meaningful for contemporary subjects.<sup>42</sup> In particular, Freeman discusses Elisabeth Subrin's *Shulie*, a reenactment of a late 1960s film portrait of a young, pre-radical feminist Shulamith Firestone. In this and in Subrin's collaborative work with Benning *The Judy Spots*, Freeman argues, 'refusing distance from the child-self becomes a means of critiquing contemporary public culture'.<sup>43</sup>

Benning's affinity with Akerman can thus be seen as itself a kind of temporal drag, an identification with a modernist aesthetic and with a representation of lesbian loneliness and outsiderhood that precedes the out-and-proud queer present (Heather Love's account of 'feeling backward' is apt).<sup>44</sup> Freeman notes that her concept 'suggests the gravitational pull that "lesbian" sometimes seems to exert upon "queer"',<sup>45</sup> and I have utilized this in my nomination 'lesbian minor cinema'. Akerman's own return to a prefeminist late 1960s might be seen not so much as another way of circumventing identity politics or subcultural inscriptions in her films but as a way of making those times, that self, present. For each filmmaker, reworking her own past (films) produces a new relationship between the filmmaker and the protagonist that addresses the viewer not as a member of a niche market, but as part of a network or collectivity.

In the demand for feature films, LGBT audiences express both their desire for what has never been and for more of the same, following both utopian and commodity logics. *Portrait of a Young Girl* and *Flat Is Beautiful* are notable for the filmmakers' choices to work in more marginal modes and formats rather than to produce commercially oriented features. The concept of minor cinema helps reformulate questions of authorship and identity, form and circulation, aesthetics and audience at stake in their work. Yet any attempt to use the idiom and resources of cinematic production is to engage the 'major'. This means confronting dominant narrative and visual codes as well as entering into the technology and commercial apparatus of production/distribution/exhibition, and it also means engaging the populist aspirations that will always animate screen cultures. If cinema is, in turn, the major language of youth narrative, then these lesbian filmmakers advocate for the minor within it.

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## Future perfect loss: Richard Fung's *Sea in the Blood*

LILY CHO

We tend to think of loss as something that has already happened. We talk about losing things. We talk about getting lost. We lose people, love, whole years. This essay is about losses that have not yet happened, about loss as something which resides as much in the future as it does in the past. Loss has a proleptic value. It is not just something which we recognize after the fact. Let me take this even further and suggest that there is something important, some political value, in *feeling* loss as an intimation of an anticipatory future imperfect, in the sense that there will have been something that is no longer there. By examining the temporal processes which structure affective collectivities, this essay seeks to understand how queer diasporic subjects emerge out of loss.

Richard Fung's video *Sea in the Blood* (2000) illustrates proleptic loss by posing a relation between grief and queer diasporic subjectivity. *Sea in the Blood* is generally considered to be the third of Fung's videos on family and Trinidad: the first, *The Way to My Father's Village* (1988), examines issues of memory, colonialism and the West looking at the East through a journey to his father's birthplace in Guangdong, China; the second, *My Mother's Village* (1990), focuses on personal history as told through Fung's mother's stories cut through with commentary from his friends. *Sea in the Blood* takes up his family's history with thalassemia, an inherited blood disease.

Opening and closing with underwater shots of Fung and his partner swimming, *Sea in the Blood* uses a series of intimate visual

artefacts – home-movie footage, photos and photographic slides from personal albums, and interviews with family members – to unfold a personal tragedy. Fung’s voiceover narrates the video and provides additional commentary in the form of running subtitles. As the old photographic slides, still in their cardboard mounts, pass across the screen, we see images of Fung as a young man who is falling in love and backpacking across Europe and Asia with his partner Tim. Through photographs and home-movie footage, we see the close relationship between Fung and his sister Nan. These two narratives come together tragically when Nan passes away only hours before Fung returns from his travels. ‘Nan has always been sick,’ Fung tells us in the voiceover. Losing her was always on the horizon for him.

*Sea in the Blood* offers a vision of proleptic loss which does not obviate grief or even melancholy but shifts the position of the subject in relation to temporality and agency. In the video, the images on the screen are often out of synch with the voiceover. Additionally, there are subtitles running across the screen which offer another node of disjunction between the image and the sound. These disjunctions suggest that loss is not so straightforward, that it moves in all kinds of directions, that it is not one thing. In *Sea in the Blood*, we see loss through images of the past that have been reanimated and recontextualized but are not simply representations of the past. Fung’s voiceover and use of subtitles shift his position in relation to these images so that his past self inhabits the present, even while his present self speaks to the past. The video’s focus on a personal story of grief and loss can also be understood as a very public one within the frame of racial melancholia which examines the relationship between private grief and public grievance.<sup>1</sup>

While the possibilities of this connection are generative, this move also emphasizes loss as ‘that which has to have already happened’. It is less evident in the conceptions of racial melancholia in the work of José Munoz, David Eng and Shinhee Han<sup>2</sup> – where there is a substantial emphasis on the subjectivity and subject formation – and more so in that of Anne Cheng, whose focus on loss as an ‘inheritance’ risks taking for granted the ‘subjective states’ which may still be in process.<sup>3</sup> This is predicated on an idea of subjectivity and its relation to the losses of the past which renders the subject as the inevitable victim of inexorable forces beyond their control. Cheng advocates ‘a serious effort at rethinking the term “agency” in relation to forms of racial grief’,<sup>4</sup> which demands an embrace of psychic pain as a condition of racialization. Further, she suggests that the pathologization of melancholia signals a coercive valorization of particular notions of psychic health. Whereas for Freud the melancholic subject is one who narcissistically remains tied to the object of loss, for Cheng this attachment to loss points to a larger refusal to ‘get over’ losses which have yet to be recognized. Arguing for an embrace of the psychic in discussions of race, Cheng focuses upon turning racial grief into grievance as a way of making affect rather than ethnicity a basis for collectivity. Even though Cheng understands that the

1 Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation and Hidden Grief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 7–14.

2 Jose Esteban Munoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), pp. 73–4; David Eng and Shinhee Han, ‘A dialogue on racial melancholia’, in David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (eds), *Loss: the Politics of Mourning* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 343–71.

3 Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, pp. 169, 29.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

actual substance of those losses cannot always be articulated, she suggests that collectivities can form out of a kind of shared experiential history. This is a tantalizing possibility that allows for an understanding of collectivities which are grounded in the psychic rather than the physical, suggesting that affect could be the ground for politics.

However, such a possibility relies upon an understanding of loss as something that has already happened, as something that the racialized subject has experienced and can thus share with others who have experienced it. Cheng's racial melancholia configures loss around an object in the past. Refusing to be cured of racial melancholia thus demands that one hold on to the object of loss, even when it is not always clear precisely what that object might be. While Cheng's work to depathologize melancholia offers a way to valorize the incurability of certain griefs, the resistance of some losses to the processes of mourning leaves intact the individuality of grief. It remains unclear precisely *how* private grief becomes a basis for political collectivity.

In response to this problem, I shall shift the discussion of racial grief for racialized subjects away from the psychic domain, where the individual psyche is still the dominant model, to the domain of reproduction: the family, the transmission of culture and memory. The problem of queer diaspora is thus not seen here as one of assimilation, where the individual or the group can seek to find a place in the heteronormative family or to fit into the host nation, but as a problem of production and reproduction. How do queer diasporic subjects not only preserve but also generate difference? In this essay I shall take the non-biological dimension of reproduction seriously in order to ask how a community not predicated on biological sameness – or literal biological reproduction – can reproduce itself as an affective community without remaining stuck in a perpetual lament over the persistent exclusions from a biologically defined community.

Taking up loss as a problem of the future as much as one of the past allows for an understanding of how loss produces collectivities through distinctly temporalized processes. As Eng asks: 'What would it mean if minoritarian group identities were defined not through a particular set of physiological distinctions or cultural bonds but through a collective group memory of historical loss and continued suffering?'<sup>5</sup> As an extension of that query which has already rendered a rich archive for the understanding of affective collectivities, I examine what it would mean if these identities could be defined not only through historical loss, but also through the subjectifying processes of the imminence of loss. *Sea in the Blood* explores loss not only as something which happens but also as something which is always on the verge of happening. This essay dwells on the losses which have not yet happened in order to understand how they illuminate the production and reproduction of queer diasporic subjectivity.

In contemporary critical discussions of loss, whether the relationship to loss is understood as a form of mourning, or as a melancholia borne out

5 David Eng, 'Melancholia in the late-twentieth century', *Signs*, vol. 25, no. 4, 'Feminisms at a millenium' (2000), p.1276.

6 Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and melancholia', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957), p. 244.

of unresolved grief, loss is understood in terms of a relationship between the present and the past. One must lose an object for mourning to occur, and one must lose an object and remain inconsolable over its loss for melancholia to set in. In *Sea in the Blood*, loss functions as neither mourning nor melancholia: even though the video is about illness and death, it is infused with joy. From the shimmering score by Phil Strong and Laurel MacDonald to the warm, orange-hued underwater footage which punctuates the video, *Sea in the Blood* is more light than dark, more celebratory than melancholic. For Freud, mourning occurs when the libido is withdrawn from the lost object so that the attachment is eventually severed. Mourning is possible when the lost object is successfully internalized. In contrast, the melancholic is distinguished by

a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment.<sup>6</sup>

Fung's video displays none of these clinical signs of melancholia in an obvious or direct way. However, to mistake this for a sign of the successful separation indicated by mourning would suggest that he has come to terms with these losses and let go of Nan, of home, of family, of Trinidad. *Sea in the Blood* is too alive to the presence of the past to be read in such a way; it has not and does not cut its losses. Much of the video consists of older images that have been edited together to form a layered and often contradictory narrative. For example, a photograph of Fung and his sister as young adults is combined with video footage of a swimmer in water, as Fung's voiceover tells of talking with his sister at night about how she was afraid 'she would never lead a normal life, never have a boyfriend', and a subtitle simultaneously confesses: 'I couldn't tell her I wanted a boyfriend'. The running subtitles throughout the video recuperate the past, the loss of Nan, and the guilt and shame of not being there when she died, by resolutely situating the images of the past within the present.

Although the subtitles in the video may read more as commentary than as linguistic translation, their deployment throughout *Sea in the Blood* indicates the possibility of other kinds of translation at work: they suggest a different language of feeling and emotion from the one which rolls across the screen. While subtitles by definition translate the dialogue of a film into another, legible language, their use here suggests that the footage might itself be translated from one time into another, and from one subject position into another. Noting the possibilities of subtitles as a point of opening up different subjective positions, B. Ruby Rich writes:

Subtitles allow us to hear other people's voices intact and give us full access to their subjectivity. Subtitles acknowledge that our language, the language of the place in which we are watching this film, is only

- 7 B. Ruby Rich, 'To read or not to read: subtitles, trailers and monolingualism', in Atom Egoyan and Ian Balfour (eds), *Subtitles: on the Foreignness of Film* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), p. 168.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 166.

- 9 Eng and Han, 'A dialogue on racial melancholia', p. 348.

- 10 Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, p. 17.

one of many languages in the world, and that at that very same moment, elsewhere they are watching movies in which characters speak in English while other languages spell out their thoughts and emotions across the bottom of the frame for other audiences.<sup>7</sup>

For Rich, subtitles offer a way out of the 'imperial normativity' of monoculturalism.<sup>8</sup> Building on Rich's argument, my reading suggests that *Sea in the Blood*'s subtitles offer access not so much to a different linguistic culture as a different temporality, where the contradictions of the past and the present come together in one frame. For example, across the bottom of a section of home-movie footage of Fung and Nan on a beach, the running subtitle reads: 'It took twenty years for me to ask my mother to describe Nan's death'. The image is one of life and childhood, and yet the subtitle focuses on death and adulthood. The preceding narrative of Nan's prognosis intimates that death was always a shadow over the liveliness of the children in this footage. The video translates the past into the present and, through the placement of this home-movie footage in the narrative, situates both of those temporalities within that of the future perfect.

*Sea in the Blood*'s stubborn refusal to let go of loss does not fit entirely within the logic of racial melancholia. The grief and grievances of racial melancholia are specific to losses which have already been incurred by racialized subjects. For example, in David Eng and Shinhee Han's complex and sophisticated 'Dialogue on racial melancholia', they suggest that 'the Asian American model minority *subject* also endures in the United States as a melancholic national *object* – as a haunting specter to demonstrate ideals of inclusion that cannot quite "get over" the histories of these legislated proscriptions of loss'.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, writing about the scene in which a black man violently demands an apology from a white man who stumbled into him in the opening sequence of Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* (1952), Cheng writes:

*This is racial melancholia for the raced subject: the internalization of discipline and rejection – and the installation of a scripted context of perception. The invisible man's racial radar, at once his perspicacity and his paranoia, is justified. For the invisible man is a melancholic object and a melancholic subject, both the one lost and the one losing.*<sup>10</sup>

The temporality of racial melancholia directs both its subjects and its objects back towards the past. Eng and Han's model minority subject remains tied to histories of exclusion and the violence of nation formation. Cheng's racial melancholic emerges out of a past injury, whether real or imagined, which both objectifies the invisible man and subjects him to a long history of racialized grief.

By contrast, *Sea in the Blood* recasts loss as a problem of the future in its emphasis on the imminence of grief. In this video, loss becomes the possible repetition of what has already been. It is not simply that Nan

dies, but that her death shares a horizon with the earlier deaths from thalassemia of Fung's other sister and brother, which occurred before he was even born yet nonetheless shape the function of loss as an always possible future which haunts every frame of the video. Thus, the homology between Tim's (AIDS) diagnosis and Nan's is not only a fluke of illnesses which touch those whom Fung loves, it also concerns the confluence of love and loss as the possible preemption of a future which is to come. These losses lie on the horizon of what is possible and indicate the contingencies of dislocation from home and desire outside the heteronormative home. The double contingency of dislocation and desire risks fatality within a certain structure of return – as that which, in being arbitrary, unscheduled, is chance and freedom, and as that which, indifferent to our will or desire, is fated. It is this peculiar concurrence of fate and choice that frames the losses of the queer diasporic subject.

*Sea in the Blood* is not an expression of a melancholic attachment to objects lost, but rather a commitment to the transformations of objects lost and then found. The video uses older, disappearing, visual technologies, such as photographic slides and 8 mm home-movie footage. The photographic slides of Fung and Tim as backpackers at the beginning of the video are introduced into the frame by a silhouetted hand holding them by their cardboard mounts against a backlight. Later in the video, the slides drop in and out of the frame as if projected on a wall by a slide projector, and we can hear the distinctive clicking sound of a carousel moving with the progression of each slide. When the home-movie footage cuts into the video, we can hear sound of an 8 mm projector quietly running under the score. By emphasizing these older technologies of viewing within the space of the video, *Sea in the Blood* transforms loss not just through the ways in which video recuperates these images, but rather through making them new precisely by hanging onto the markers of their antiquity. These older images are not brought seamlessly into the video but are placed there, sometimes with just a thumb and forefinger holding up the slide, as disjunctive elements of the past which will have happened. Through these images of home, caught within almost obsolete visual technologies, the video instantiates the future perfect temporality of loss.

This reading suggests that loss can be carried forward not only as a condition of the future but also as a way of converting the desires of the present for home. Gayatri Gopinath outlines the intricacies of the desire for home for queer diasporas thus: 'if "home", as Dorinne Kondo states, is for "peoples in diaspora" that which "we cannot not want", home, for a queer diasporic subject becomes not only that which "we cannot not want", but also that which we cannot and could never have'.<sup>11</sup> In *Sea in the Blood*, losing Nan is also connected to the possibilities of losing home and a home country. Over archival footage of a visit by Queen Elizabeth to Trinidad, Fung as narrator tells us:

In 1962 . . . Britain granted independence to Trinidad and Tobago and the national holiday fell on Nan's birthday, August 31. Before

11 Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 173.

that, she used to say that she was born on the same day as Queen Wilhelmina of Holland. Now, the whole country celebrated her birthday.

Through the accident of birthdays, the video ties Nan not merely to Trinidad but rather to a postcolonial Trinidad, whose liberation from colonialism does not dismantle it as a place of loss for Fung.

In this space of desiring the impossible, while having no chance of dispensing with want in the first place, queer diasporic subjects must navigate an imperfect future by working to transform the conditions of the future perfect. If loss is on the horizon, then that horizon has not yet been reached. In the interval, there are transformative possibilities. As Gopinath notes of the queer South Asian texts she discusses in *Impossible Desires*, 'home is a vexed location where queer subjects whose very desires and subjectivities are formed by its logic simultaneously labor to transform it'.<sup>12</sup> Working to change the very spaces which so often seek to elide the presence of queers in diaspora, queer diasporic subjects cannot so simply give up homes to loss. Gopinath contrasts this hanging on to home by queer diasporic subjects with the configuration of home as a place of desertion by metropolitan queers: 'while many lesbian and gay texts imagine "home" as a place to be left behind, to be escaped in order to emerge into another, more liberatory space, the queer South Asian diasporic texts I consider . . . are more concerned with remaking the space of home from within'.<sup>13</sup> For Gopinath, queer diasporas transform the 'impossible spaces' of the heteronormative diasporic home into 'vibrant, livable spaces of possibility'.<sup>14</sup> It is this very vibrancy which reverberates throughout *Sea in the Blood*. The video transforms home, remaking the impossibilities of queer desire in a heteronormative home into the possibilities of desire and recognition. When his mother, speaking directly to camera, says 'I was really mad at Richard', it is not only a statement of past emotion but also an acknowledgement of the possibilities of home as a space of love and anger.

It might be tempting to read Fung's reluctance to go home within that all too familiar narrative of the oppressive diasporic family attempting to drag a wayward son back into the fold of familial love. For instance, in Tim's recollection of Fung's reaction to the phone call from his older sister, Arlene, Tim says: 'I do remember you getting a phone call from Arlene and being really upset afterwards and saying, They've won, they've won. They've got me back.' It may seem as though the diasporic family here is a site of containment, a coercive structure which works against the liberatory possibilities of queer love. But there is something more at stake beyond 'the globalization of "gay" identity that replicates a colonial narrative of development and progress that judges all "other" sexual cultures, communities, and practices against a model of Euro-American sexual identity'.<sup>15</sup> It would be a mistake to understand the video's casting of Tim's recollection as an expression of globalized gay identity where queer desire offers an escape from repressions of the

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 14–15.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 194.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

racialized, diasporic family. To read the moment of Fung's belated homecoming as the illustration of the tragedy of the impossible choices – between home and desire, blood and belonging – is to misunderstand Fung's procrastination, his delay in returning home to Nan, as a reaction to what he does not know as opposed to an indication of what he does.

To explain this further, let me turn to the moment in the video when Richard receives the urgent telegrams from his family during his travels with Tim. Over the slightly faded slides of Richard and Tim traveling through Europe and South Asia, Fung relates the details of his trip. Tim takes care of him when he gets sick. He takes him trekking to Anapurna. And then, as the slides continue to pass across the screen, Fung tells us,

We'd come back to Dehli to find a letter waiting. Nan's condition is worse. We make it back to Europe but, I don't know why, I don't go home. Not yet. Instead we go to Ireland. I show Tim my old high school in Dublin. Arlene phones. Nan is dying, she says. And I knew she meant it.

At this moment the screen goes black. In place of the slides, Fung tell us through an intertitle in stark white lettering, 'I stop taking pictures'. Just as the cessation of the visual history of his travels reveals something more than simply the end of his trip, his declaration of uncertainty over the reason for delaying the end of the trip reveals something more than an impulse to keep traveling. When the screen goes black, the complexities of love and guilt seem to spill out over the edges of that darkness. When Fung says, 'I don't know why, but I don't go home', he tells his audience something about what he *does* know. Fung's voiceover contradicts the slides of himself and Tim, traveling, smiling with backpacks and with India in the background, which drop in and out of the screen at this point. There is a disconnect between what he tells us and what he shows us: a discrepancy which signals the ways in which home and love no longer neatly map onto each other. The professed dark spot in his knowledge reveals what he almost knows, but cannot yet articulate, about the function of loss for the production of queer diasporic subjectivity.

Such an explicit moment of not knowing touches upon how loss can be experienced as a function of the future precisely because the shape of it is still in formation. Fung knows that he is going to lose something. But all the time he has been practising what Heather Love, in an evocation of Elizabeth Bishop, calls the art of losing – that 'association between homosexual love and loss [which] has given queers special insight into love's failures and impossibilities'.<sup>16</sup> Fung knows that loss is on the horizon. Earlier in the video, Fung notes: 'Nan's eventual death was a fact I was born into like mangos in July, or Carnival before Lent'. Similarly, he notes that Tim takes 'fifty-six pills a day and injects himself four times a week'. But there is a difference between the fact of Nan's eventual death, of Tim's eventual death, and how the video attends to loss as a function of the future. Like mangos in July, the deaths of his

16 Heather Love, *Feeling Backwards: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 22.

17 Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 128.

18 Eng, 'Melancholia in the late-twentieth century', p. 1278.

older brother and sister anticipate the certainty of Nan's death. They die before Nan will have. Nan's death anticipates the possibility of Tim's. She will have died before Tim might have. The future perfect is a verb tense fraught with sadnesses of eventualities which have not yet happened but which nonetheless haunt the present. The future perfect loss this video offers does not predict the future; it understands that some losses can be felt proleptically, conditioned by deaths that will have happened. It is not that she will die but that she will have died before he can return home to say good-bye, before she could meet Tim. That which will have happened leaves him vulnerable to all that which might have come before.

Feeling loss proleptically is crucially different from feeling it as a prophecy. It is precisely the unknowability of loss's prolepsis that is important here. Prophecies predict certain futures. Prolepsis is predictive but uncertain; it lies on the edges of possibility. Nan's and Tim's deaths will become an inevitability, but there is another kind of loss which Fung intimates in that extraordinary moment of his not knowing when he enters loss as a structure of feeling precisely in Raymond Williams's terms.<sup>17</sup> In that moment, Fung opens up *how* private grief might form a basis for political collectivities emerging out of affect. Fung illuminates the proleptic possibilities of loss as a profoundly social condition which marks the violence of the processes of the production and reproduction of queer diasporic subjects.

This reading raises a problem with the temporality of grief in current discussions of racial melancholia. If we follow the logic of racial melancholia, then the diasporic subject is doomed to the endlessness of holding on to grief in order to sustain a grievance. If we do not, then the diasporic subject appears to be lured by assimilation into becoming a healthy subject whose losses have been successfully mourned. This polarization of the temporality of grief is deeply unsatisfactory. Either one refuses the cure or one remains indefinitely 'sick'. Even the valorization, depathologization and recuperation of melancholia cannot resolve the affective limbo in which this state of unresolved and perpetual grieving leaves the racialized subject. Nor, as Eng recognizes, does the gender melancholy which Judith Butler explicates in the *The Psychic Life of Power*, explain how it is that the losses incurred through gender formation disproportionately affect 'women, homosexuals, people of color, and postcolonials' who 'bear the greatest burden of unresolved grief'.<sup>18</sup> For queer diasporic subjects, the question remains as to how loss might be enabling without condemning its subject to solidarities born out of an unending attachment to the griefs and grievances of the past.

In trying to resolve this polarization of the temporality of grief, we might explore a more materialist engagement with loss through Williams's concept of 'structures of feeling'. In recuperating the psychic for the study of race, Cheng notes that:

19 Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, p. 6.

we hardly know how to confront the psychical imprints of racial grief except through either neglect or sentimentalization. Part of the problem has to do with how we understand social healing and the tendency to rely on exclusively material or quantifiable terms to articulate that injury.<sup>19</sup>

However, racial melancholia's dispensing with the material risks occluding a sense of the temporality of grief, injury and loss. The specificities of time and history attend to the injuries suffered and the losses incurred by the processes of racialization, minoritization and dislocation. The collective histories of loss may accumulate to form a basis for solidarities, but they nonetheless demand an attention to the finer textures and distinctions of loss. One of the challenges of deploying private grief as a ground for political collectivity lies in remaining open to the uncertainties of loss while also acknowledging that the feelings of loss have a structure. It is not an amorphous and infinite affective abyss into which those who, as Eng understands, bear the greatest burden of unresolved grief must fall. Attending to the materiality of grief, and specifically to its temporality within the processes of social formation, allows for an understanding of how feeling loss moves through time and space to connect private grief to public grievance.

*Sea in the Blood* is deceptively private in the story it tells of loss. It seems to be simply the narrative of a particular family, a particular set of relationships, the death of Nan, Fung's belated homecoming and Tim's survival. It does not claim to tell the story of queers in diaspora. And yet, it is this very privacy, the intensity of its specificity, that signals its affiliation with something larger, something more public than the story of one family's struggle with a relatively rare illness. Thalassemia is not, after all, an illness with the kind of cultural histories and political movements which have been associated with AIDS. Despite this, the privacy of feeling connected to Nan's death is a reminder that structures of feeling are 'a social experience which is still *in process*, often indeed not yet recognized to be social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic and even isolating'.<sup>20</sup> The knowledge of proleptic loss, of loss as the possible repetition of a future past, functions as a structure of feeling precisely in that it is a profoundly social experience which can all too easily be mistaken for a private one.

This definition of structures of feeling speaks to the prolepsis of loss in *Sea in the Blood* and the ways in which the video emphasizes not just loss, but loss as it is related to time. The repetitive use of the home-video footage of Fung and his sister at the beach and of the orange-hued underwater footage signals a temporality which turns in on itself yet is not entirely circular. The footage recurs but progresses at the same time: it spirals; it suggests that some things, some feelings, may surface again and again within their own temporalities. As Sianne Ngai observes, it is important to remember that structures of feelings are temporally inflected.<sup>21</sup> For Williams, structures of feeling are premonitory, they are

20 Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, p. 132.

21 Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 359.

<sup>22</sup> Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, p. 134.

‘on the edge of semantic availability’.<sup>22</sup> The future perfect condition of the losses in *Sea in the Blood* are richly suggestive of what Fung almost knows but cannot fully articulate: ‘I don’t know why, but I don’t go home. Not yet.’ Fung has a premonition of loss but the fullness of these losses – which are connected not only to Nan but also to his love for Tim and the heartbreak of familial love tugging away at new love – are not yet available to the solidities of speech and expression. The screen goes to black. There are no images for what he knows at the edge of knowing.

It is this that distinguishes the prolepsis of his loss from the griefs and grievances of mourning and melancholia. It is one thing to experience loss and then feel it in relation to that experience. It is another thing entirely to anticipate it as something that will have happened even though it has not yet come to pass. In privileging feeling over experience, all the while recognizing the relationship between feeling and experience, Williams is careful to reject tying structures of feelings to the past:

An alternative definition would be structures of experience: in one sense the better and wider word, but with the difficulty that one of its senses has that past tense which is the most important obstacle to recognition of the area of social experience which is being defined.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

The feelings of loss in *Sea in the Blood* lie neither in the sanitized conclusiveness of mourning nor entirely within the endlessness of melancholia. They suggest something in formation which looks backwards and forwards, and which is resolutely aware of that which is to come.

Understanding loss as a structure of feeling for queer diasporic subjects enables an engagement with the ways in which the subject anticipates the sorrows of social reproduction. Taking proleptic loss as an indication of what the queer diasporic subject already knows about the production and reproduction of queer diasporic subjectivities raises the question of futurity. While I share Kate Thomas’s sense of political solidarity with Lee Edelman’s *No Future*,<sup>24</sup> I would also expand her imaginings of a queer future through Michael Field, who ‘makes lineage, generation and posterity into a downright kinky business’.<sup>25</sup> The shape of loss in *Sea in the Blood* suggests the possibility of understanding loss not as the removal of objects but as the generation of subjects. Specifically, proleptic loss as a structure of feeling suggests that the production and reproduction of queer diasporic subjects can occur in that difficult place of feeling differently. These are feelings which are ‘*in solution*’, they are not in flux but in the process of emergence.<sup>26</sup> Feeling loss’s difference, perhaps feeling different losses, Fung does not know why he does not go home, but his delay suggests some knowledge of why he should stay with Tim. It is a structure of feeling ‘discovered . . . in relatively isolated ways, which are only later seen to compose a significant (often in fact minority) generation; this [is] often, in turn, the generation that substantially connects to its successors’.<sup>27</sup> What might seem like an isolated feeling of loss (Nan’s death) bound inextricably to the wondrousness of first love

<sup>24</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

<sup>25</sup> Kate Thomas, ‘Post-sex: on being too slow, too stupid, too soon’, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 106, no. 3 (2007), pp. 622–3.

<sup>26</sup> Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, p. 133.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

(finding Tim) and the heaviness of guilt and shame (choosing to stay with Tim in Europe instead of flying immediately home to be with Nan) might, with the passage of time, be seen more clearly as the composition of the particularities of queer diasporic subjectivity. It is a subjectivity that emerges out of structures of feelings which are neither idiosyncratic nor isolated but rather the source of connection and generation. The future perfect function of loss in *Sea in the Blood* suggests that queer diasporic lineage and generation might lie in the loneliness of what it means to feel something without fully knowing it, of having a sense of what is to come without knowing precisely what that might be.

The proleptic value of loss lies in its imagining of queer diasporic futures which are neither naive about, nor obligated by, the 'art of losing'.<sup>28</sup> To think of loss in its materiality illuminates the productivity of its relation to the future. Structures of feeling suggest that queer diasporic subjects might find collectivities and solidarities defined through 'a collective memory of historical loss and continued suffering', but not bound to that history in a state of perpetual melancholia.<sup>29</sup> Instead, the queer diasporic subject anticipates the future as a past which could already have happened but which nonetheless retains the uncertainties of that which is still in formation.

It is not that queers in diaspora share the same experience of loss and can thus build solidarities around that experience, rather that what is shared lies on the horizon of possibility, as that past which conditions, but does not necessarily define, the future. What is held in common is not an identifiable object of loss, but the losses which could already have happened. The particularities of the losses incurred will necessarily vary from individual to individual, but the sense of the loss as a function of an uncertain future contingent upon a certain past, the sense of simultaneously knowing and not knowing, can be the basis of something beyond the individual. Love is right in her suggestion that Williams's concept functions diagnostically – it detects 'impulses that are not yet organized into movements'.<sup>30</sup> As she notes: 'Particularly in thinking about the psychic damage of social exclusion, it seems useful to consider a range of negative affects as indexes of social trauma'.<sup>31</sup> Whilst for Love, structures of feeling may be helpful for thinking about individual trauma because of the intimacy of the effects of homophobia, I am suggesting that structures of feelings might be used to understand feelings across collectivities. What is shared is not the specificity of homophobia experienced as an individual trauma but that much more nebulous knowledge prior to the experience of injury itself. Simply because it has not yet happened does not mean that it will not have happened. There can be solidarities and collectivities in that which has not yet been articulated. The losses in *Sea in the Blood* are losses that are contingent upon an uncertain future.

To conclude, I turn to consideration of loss as a problem for the future of New Queer Cinema and for queer studies more generally. Something has gone wrong with New Queer Cinema. Whether we call it

<sup>28</sup> Love, *Feeling Backwards*, p. 22.

<sup>29</sup> Eng, 'Melancholia in the late-twentieth century', p. 1276.

<sup>30</sup> Love, *Feeling Backwards*, p. 12.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

32 B. Ruby Rich, 'Vision quest: searching for diamonds in the rough', *Village Voice*, 19 March 2002, p. 1.

33 Jules Pidduck, 'New Queer Cinema and experimental video', in Michele Aaron (ed.), *New Queer Cinema: a Reader* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), pp. 85–6.

34 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 86.

gaysploitation and bemoan the rampant proliferation of sexual confusion romcoms or we simply recognize, as B. Ruby Rich did in 2002, that 'this is not the movement I had in mind',<sup>32</sup> there is a sense that the political, emotional energy which made New Queer Cinema possible has been lost. Of course, no one wants to a return to a time when being diagnosed with AIDS was an immediate death sentence. But an immense amount of energy came out of the crisis of the AIDS epidemic. In the first world, the perception that AIDS has shifted from being a terminal illness to a chronic one opens up an impasse for New Queer Cinema and queer studies. As Julianne Pidduck notes:

It might be argued that the eclipse of New Queer Cinema coincides with another epistemic shift in queer culture where HIV/AIDS is imagined (if not necessarily experienced) as 'past', a 'chronic manageable condition' in Western countries; at this juncture the encounter with death and loss requires a different analytic and affective register.<sup>33</sup>

Thinking about loss as a problem of the future enables new solidarities which move out of the urgency of crisis and into the urgency of the proleptic.

In shifting from the temporality of crisis exemplified by the slogan on the T-shirt worn by Tim and other activists at the 1989 AIDS Conference, 'AIDS, Action, Now!', to the temporality of managed care, *Sea in the Blood* does not suggest that the crisis is in the past. Rather, it marks the ways in which illness can be both chronic and terminal, the way it looks backward and forward through the lens of loss. Following Pidduck's case for the continuing resonance of José Arroyo's argument that AIDS is the political unconscious of New Queer Cinema, it seems to me that what this video offers is a different analytic and affective register for engaging with death and loss. It suggests that loss, and the losses brought on by illness in particular, are as much a part of the past as they are of the future. It responds to Mike Hoolbloom's question: 'How are we going to live?'.<sup>34</sup> *Sea in the Blood* illuminates loss as that which we live close to. In an e-mail to his sister Arlene which scrolls across the screen, Fung writes, 'I've always lived close to illness'. Moving out of the temporality of crisis does not mean letting go of the urgency of loss. Rather, it means recognizing that inhabiting the contradictions of queer diasporic subjectivity emerges out of and through loss. Harnessing the political value of that moment of unknowing – 'I don't know why, but I don't go home' – allows for a politics which depends less on the spectre of certain death than on the uncertainty of certain death.

In its consideration of the temporality of chronic illness, *Sea in the Blood* suggests a way of understanding the centrality of AIDS for New Queer Cinema and queer studies now. It suggests that a perception of an 'end' to the crisis of HIV/AIDS in the first world does not mark an end for New Queer Cinema. The cinematic movement that Rich had in mind has not been lost to complacency and commercialization. As Fung's

video shows, the collectivities and solidarities of New Queer Cinema can be found in shifting to an understanding of loss as generative of subjectivities.

Even though she agrees that 'there is some value . . . in being a bit backward', Thomas closes her reflection on contemporary queer theory by considering the possibilities and pleasures of 'that lurching reach forward – that proleptic urge'.<sup>35</sup> Indulging in that urge, *Sea in the Blood* looks into future perfect loss and finds, within the pain of grief and illness, the joy and pleasure of solidarity and collectivity. The underwater footage which bookends and punctuates the video shows Fung and Tim emerging from the water at the end of the video. They do not remain submerged. They are smiling and their bodies are shimmering from the water on their skin. These closing frames point to a queer cinema which is taken up less with crisis and more with the joy of emerging from crisis. It is a joy informed by a full knowledge of future perfect loss.

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## The courtroom and the closet in *The Thin Blue Line* and *Capturing the Friedmans*

ZOË DRUICK

*The Thin Blue Line* (Errol Morris, 1988) and *Capturing the Friedmans* (Andrew Jarecki, 2003) are both exceptional documentaries that seem to operate against expectations of form, highlighting the failure of memory and the elusiveness of truth. The films explore trouble zones: trauma, dysfunction, transgression and, ultimately, criminality. At the heart of each film is a sexual event or fantasy that is dangerously non-normative. In both cases, this remains unnarrated and becomes a defining absence. Somehow the queer sexuality at the heart of the criminal cases in both films cannot be clearly expressed, and thus they seem to illustrate Eve Sedgwick's notion of the epistemology of the closet: 'The relations of the closet – the relations of the known and the unknown, the explicit and the inexplicit around homo/heterosexual definition – have the potential for being peculiarly revealing, in fact, about speech acts more generally.'<sup>1</sup> According to Sedgwick, regimes of truth produce their own penumbras of ignorance, and the closet becomes a 'shaping presence' in social life for everyone, gay and straight alike.<sup>2</sup>

*The Thin Blue Line* tells the story of Randall Dale Adams, a man whom director Errol Morris believes was wrongfully convicted for the shooting of police officer Robert Wood in Dallas County in 1976. Morris shows that the evidence for conviction does not add up, and what we begin to see instead is the framing of an innocent man.<sup>3</sup> So successful was Morris's advocacy for Adams that his case was reopened after the

<sup>1</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>3</sup> Renée Curry, 'Errol Morris's construction of innocence in *The Thin Blue Line*', *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, vol. 49, no. 2 (1995), pp. 153–67; Richard Sherwin, 'Law frames: historical truth and narrative necessity in a criminal case', *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 47, no. 1 (1994), pp. 39–83.

4 *Capturing the Friedmans* DVD (HBO Video and Warner Home Video, 2004).

5 Carlo Ginzburg, 'Checking the evidence: the judge and the historian', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 18, no. 1 (1991), pp. 84–5.

6 Bennett L. Gershman, 'The Thin Blue Line: Art or trial in the fact-finding process', *Pace Law Review*, no. 9 (1989), pp. 275–317; Jennifer Mnookin and Nancy West, 'Theaters of proof: visual evidence and the law in *Call Northside 777*', *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities*, no. 13 (2001), pp. 329–90.

release of the film and he was subsequently freed from prison, though not exonerated. However, a certain ambiguity remains, for although Adams seems innocent of the crime, in other ways his guilt is implied.

In *Capturing the Friedmans*, Jarecki too sees himself as an advocate, in this case for Jesse Friedman, the youngest son of the Friedman clan, who was imprisoned for thirteen years after pleading guilty to multiple counts of sexual abuse of children. He now denies his guilt and is working to reopen the case and clear his name. In interviews, Jarecki makes clear that his agenda is to have the film serve as the 'trial that never was', and to this end he asks the audience to examine the evidence and reconsider the case.<sup>4</sup> Both filmmakers intend their films to be advocacy tools for wrongfully convicted men. But they seem to exceed the intentions of their directors, leaving gaps and inconsistencies, perhaps inevitably taking on the cultural ambiguity of the stories they tell.

Queer sexuality is not apparently at issue in these films, especially in *The Thin Blue Line*. The offences with which they are concerned – murder in the *The Thin Blue Line*, paedophilia in *Capturing the Friedmans* – have led those involved to the court system, where certain binding conclusions about guilt and innocence have been reached. The films revisit the decisions made by the courts, interviewing the players in the case with the intention of unearthing new perspectives and promoting different outcomes. They succeed to varying degrees in indicating the blind spots, amnesia and fantasies of the judicial system. Yet despite these potentially radical insights, the films themselves do not – perhaps cannot – escape a cultural bind: both films rely upon epistemological closets of their own, keeping sexual secrets even while they seem bent on exposing the traumatic truth. In both cases, they demonstrate a homophobic logic that the filmmakers pick up on and refract but never address directly. Although selection and omission are the stock in trade of documentary film practice, the consistency of the repressed sexuality in each film invites a broader cultural analysis.

In 'Checking the evidence: the judge and the historian', historian Carlo Ginzburg observes that 'sometimes cases a judge would dismiss as juridically nonexistent turn out to be fruitful to a historian's eye'.<sup>5</sup> The same seems to hold for documentaries about legal cases: sometimes a documentary filmmaker can find more in a legal case than a judge is able to. For historian and documentarian alike, legal cases are springboards for the discussion of a plethora of social issues. One of the defining formal features of the criminal justice system is its adversarial nature: interested parties present opposing perspectives on past events. An overall reliance upon cross-examination as a means of testing the other side's evidence is designed to throw the adversary's approach into question. *The Thin Blue Line* and *Capturing the Friedmans* mimic this trial technique and invite testimony from the people involved, from the accused to experts, witnesses, police, lawyers and judges.<sup>6</sup> Rather than simply recreating the cases, however, the filmmakers act instead as

highly interested members of what amounts to a cinematic defence team, selecting the evidence and shaping the material to bring about a favourable public opinion of their film's protagonist. In addition, the films both draw on aspects of personality and character that go well beyond what would be permissible in a court of law.

Although a close relationship between documentary film and the public exposure of criminal justice might be expected, these two films are of particular interest precisely because the homology is not exact. Liberal democratic theory proposes the necessity of an open court system and citizen participation in the proceedings, as jurors and audience members. In this, film and television could certainly be seen to have an important role, extending the reach of the courts to the public at large. The link between documentary film and criminal justice stretches back to the origin of the word 'documentary' in the categorization of legal evidence. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first recorded use of the term 'documentary' is in utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham's legal treatise *Rationale of Judicial Evidence*, in which the author distinguishes live testimony from that conveyed by means of documents, 'despositional testimonial evidence, and documentary evidence', delivered either orally or 'scriptitiously'.<sup>7</sup> Documentary, in this way, is historically linked with the conveyance of evidence and testimony. Bentham's concept of documentary evidence was echoed in John Grierson's first use of the word as an adjective in a review of Robert Flaherty's 1926 film *Moana*, which he deemed to have 'documentary value'.<sup>8</sup> The ability to contribute representations of the world in order for the public, not unlike juries, to come to their own decisions about the evidence, is part of the history of the form in the Anglo-American tradition that has sometimes been inadequately acknowledged.<sup>9</sup>

Enlightenment courtroom architecture was designed to resemble a theatre, in a conscious decision to present those involved as actors in a democratic drama. In each criminal case, a person charged with violating the social contract is given a verdict by his or her peers – 'guilty' or 'not guilty' – in an attempt to right the social order.<sup>10</sup> A free press plays a key role in investigating and reporting on court proceedings, extending in a sense the theatricality of the courtroom to the verdict and overview of a broader public. Yet in the realm of criminal justice, documentary film has been less of a presence than either news or fiction. No doubt this is partly due to the usual timeline of documentaries, which often take longer to make than the cases on which they are reporting. There are notable exceptions, films that examine the operations of the criminal justice system more abstractly, such as *Juvenile Court* (Frederick Wiseman, 1973), *The 10th District Court – Moments of Trial* (Raymond Depardon, 2004) and *Presumed Guilty* (Pamela Yates, 2002) which deal with American public defenders. Other films revisit the facts in contested and spectacular murder trials, such as *Incident at Oglala* (Michael Apted, 1992), and a pair of films by Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky, *Brother's Keeper* (1992) and *Paradise Lost* (1996).

7 Jeremy Bentham, *Rationale of Judicial Evidence, Volume I* (London: Hunt & Clarke, 1827), pp. 54–5.

8 John Grierson, 'Flaherty's poetic *Moana*', *New York Sun*, 8 February 1926.

9 Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real* (London: British Film Institute, 1995), p. 140.

10 K.F. Taylor, *In the Theatre of Criminal Justice: the Palais de justice in Second Empire Paris* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> Elaine Rapping, *Law and Justice as Seen on TV* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2003), pp. 21–99; Mariana Valverde, *Law and Order: Images, Meanings, Myths* (Abingdon: Routledge-Cavendish, 2006), pp. 96–114.

<sup>12</sup> Linda Williams, 'Mirrors without memories: truth, history and *The Thin Blue Line*', in Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski (eds), *Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video* (Detroit, IL: Wayne State University Press, 1998), p. 379.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 382.

<sup>14</sup> Sherwin, 'Law frames', pp. 59–60.

Criminal proceedings may certainly be seen as an essential aspect of democratic social theory, a performative moment whereby the state is kept in check by its citizens, and the role of the media in publicizing and exposing both the crimes and the fairness of the proceedings is held to be essential. Despite the important links between documentary and public information, however, thus far the genre has played a limited role in exposing criminal (in)justice, most often leaving that work to daily newspapers and newscasts covering trials or to the fictionalized world of long-running series that have dominated television screens since the 1950s and their reality show spinoffs, such as *COPS* and *Judge Judy*.<sup>11</sup> The two films under discussion here reference the public service tradition, while simultaneously partaking of other media discourses, such as confessional culture and popular mysteries. Although they are clearly descended from documentary's tradition of public service, their emphasis on illegibility and complexity destabilizes the ability of audience members to decide on a verdict.

*The Thin Blue Line* takes pride of place for its ability to mobilize effects in the world – a vexed issue in documentary studies – but is also seen as a watershed in documentary form. In her influential article, 'Mirrors without memories: truth, history and *The Thin Blue Line*', Linda Williams sets out a concern characteristic of the early 1990s: that a proliferation of images, on the one hand, will be matched with an evacuation of the referent, on the other, leading to a 'crisis of representation'.<sup>12</sup> Williams goes on to compare worst-case scenarios of this postmodern ahistoricism, such as Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991), with 'low budget postmodern documentary', *The Thin Blue Line* and *Shoah* (Claude Lanzmann, 1985). She argues that these films propound a 'newer, more contingent, relative, postmodern truth ... which still operates powerfully as the receding horizon of the documentary tradition'.<sup>13</sup> This argument holds *a fortiori* when looking at the unspoken yet structuring sexual relationship at the heart of the film.

One of the defining issues that compelled the framing of Adams by the police and Morris's particular approach to telling this story is the relationship between the two men involved, Adams and Harris. Most writing on the film has been discreet about the information that emerged at the trial that the two men were engaged in a sexual relationship on the day they spent together driving around, drinking beer, smoking pot and going to watch porn films.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, ever since the murder, despite multiple retellings of the crime, the day shared by the two men has been shrouded in obfuscation. The closest we get to this in the film is the elisions in the two men's testimonies. Harris recounts the day with a smirk on his face and a number of telling ellipses. 'I ended up following him to his room where him and his brother were staying. Eventually, that evening, that afternoon, that evening, we go get some beer and what have you. And we smoked a little marijuana and what have you ...' Harris recounts what Adams said when he reneged on his promise that the young man could stay in his motel room later that night. 'We went back

to his room. He was supposed to ask his brother if I could stay there, but he said that his brother don't like to do that, or something, you know.' In the final confession, Harris says, 'If you could say there's one reason that Randall Adams is in jail, it might be because of the fact that he didn't have no place for somebody to stay that helped him that night'. As one delves more deeply into the case, the implication of these statements is of retribution by someone who thought there might be a quid pro quo for sex.

Adams's description of his confession is also mysteriously partial, encapsulated in the way in which he describes the negotiation of his written testimony: 'When it was basically what I liked, yes, I signed it'. Morris visually underlines the gaps in Adams's confession by including his multiple refusals, which appear as lapses in memory, typewritten phrases shot in extreme closeup, such as 'I do not remember anything', and the motif of the multiple typewritten 'x' ('xxxxxxxxx') in place of representable recollections. Adams's brother's role in the conviction is reiterated by a policeman who notes that he changed his story and would not testify on his brother's behalf, even though he was the only one who could verify Adams's alibi that he had been in the motel room at the time of the murder.

Not only was Adams a twenty-eight year old who could be characterized by the prosecution as a long-haired drifter, he was also most likely gay, responding to the pickup of a sixteen year old as he walked along the highway to get gas. When seen through this lens, even Adams's ruminations at the film's beginning – 'Why did I meet this kid? I don't know. But it happened. It happened' – are not only a general consideration of the role of chance in human lives, but more specifically a lament by someone with a criminalized sexuality. Dallas in 1976 is not only generally unfriendly, even unworlly, but it is particularly so for a migrant working-class gay man living in a motel with his brother. The risks associated with being outed or even attacked thus form the closeted subtext of the story. One might imagine that Morris, otherwise so fascinated with movie scripts in everyday life, would have pursued the murderous-couple-on-the-run motif in his retelling of the events,<sup>15</sup> yet he leaves this vein entirely untapped. Indeed the film goes in the opposite direction, leaving out the fact of the men's liaison completely, in order perhaps that this disclosure not put Adams, living on death row when the interviews were conducted in 1986, at risk. In its place, Morris mobilizes his memorable reenactments, replaying the shooting sequence over a dozen times, adding variations based on the testimony of various witnesses. Not one testimony proposes that the two men were parked by the side of the road engaged in sexual activity. Does this elision avoid an unnecessary discussion of sexuality in the conviction of the wrong man, or contribute to a homophobic logic that informed the men's brief relationship and the subsequent search for a 'scapegoat' at the trial?

Scapegoating is also an issue in *Capturing the Friedmans*. Indeed, Jarecki's repeated use of the image of David Friedman dressed in a clown

15 See Charles Musser, 'Film truth, documentary, and the law: justice at the margins', *University of San Francisco Law Review*, vol. 30, no. 4 (1996), p. 997.

suit seems like visual shorthand for the vulnerability of the Friedman clan. Jarecki takes an interest in the story of the youngest Friedman, Jesse, aged eighteen when he and his father, Arnold, some years before, were charged with organizing a child sex ring in the suburbs of New York. The criminal investigation began when Arnold, a middle-class family man, was charged with possession of child pornography. Arnold, it seems, was both a paedophile and a devoted father, as well as a dedicated and well-loved teacher. His possession of child pornography triggered an anxiety in the police sex crimes unit about the possible physical abuse of the boys who attended computer classes at the Friedman residence. Although both Arnold and Jesse pleaded guilty to the implausible number of charges, Jarecki asks us to see these admissions as themselves inaccurate, spawned by the fear of a worse fate to come if the case went to trial.

In the midst of the fear of 'satanic' sex rings that swept Reagan-era America, as well as the popularization of the discourse about false memory syndrome, Jarecki paints a picture of the homophobic hysteria encouraged by the sex crimes unit and the resultant unification of the Long Island community of Great Neck into a hysterical mob. The homophobia linked to the paedophilia is made clear on the extras available on the *Friedmans* DVD. The sex crimes investigators reportedly terrorized the families of the computer students by threatening that if the boys could not remember the abuse, it was a sign that they were going to grow up gay, a strategy that apparently encouraged many 'false memories'. Although this material is left out of the text of the film itself, it is implied in the example of Howard, Arnold's younger brother. In a series of confessions about his paedophilia made to his lawyer from jail, Arnold reported, among other things, that he had engaged in sexual relations with his younger brother, with whom he shared a bed, over a number of years when they were children. Howard, a man of sixty-five at the time of filming, claims in the film not to remember these encounters; he is also gay, a fact hidden from the viewer until the final moments of the film.<sup>16</sup> Through the relationship between the brothers, and the suppression of information about Howard, the film seems to sustain the homophobic logic of the link between paedophilic abuse (in this case between children) and becoming homosexual.

Many reviewers noted the telling of contradictory truths and the implied insufficiency of both memory and film in the *Friedmans* as, despite all the confusion, the family had captured much of its life on home movies, used extensively by Jarecki.<sup>17</sup> As with *The Thin Blue Line*, Jarecki's film has been characterized as a postmodern documentary, showing through its use of images without referents (the happy family videos) and referents without images (the scenes of abuse) the ultimate impossibility of signifying truth on film. In *Trauma Cinema*, Janet Walker observes that because the *Friedmans* offers conflicting accounts of the past, the audience turns to the home-movie footage for evidence of a clear story about events in the family and are thwarted by what they see.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Arthur, 'True confessions, sort of', *Cineaste*, vol. 28, no. 4 (2003), p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Mark Kermode, 'Video nasty', *New Statesman*, 12 April 2004, p. 45.

‘Even if you have tape, even if you have an unmanipulated record of catastrophic past events, those moving shadows must still be read in context’, she writes. ‘Meaning is neither self-evident nor unitary.’<sup>18</sup> Here Walker is approaching the closet of a film that simultaneously confronts and deflects the issues of sexuality at the heart of its complex story.

It becomes clear on the DVD that the Friedman brothers David and Jesse agreed to participate in the film (another brother, Seth, did not), as well as its promotion, in order to contribute to the cause of seeking exoneration for Jesse. There are, for example, scenes of them participating in discussions at public screenings of the film. (It has already been many years since Arnold committed suicide in jail.) As with *The Thin Blue Line*, the goal of the film is to show the problems with, and to discredit the process of, the justice system, in this case because the accused opted for a plea bargain rather than a trial. The many clips of home movies provided by the Friedman family and used by Jarecki humanize the members of a family that have been demonized by their neighbours, the police, the justice system and the news media. But they are profoundly ambiguous; they cannot prove anything. As with the reenactments in *The Thin Blue Line*, the home movies add a proliferation of signifiers to a zone where signification remains elusive. They are a structural symptom of the epistemological closet and its effects.

So far I have revisited the ways in which a closet operates as a site of both knowledge and ignorance production in *The Thin Blue Line* and *Capturing the Friedmans*. The ambiguity expressed in the text of each film – an excessive overabundance of signs, the proliferation of competing discourses – demonstrates that each has encountered a trouble zone. The textual complexity combined with the immense popularity of these films has led me to wonder about the uncomfortable place of sexuality in documentary films, especially ones engaging with the traditional work of constituting publics. The work of Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant on ‘sex in public’ provides some key insights into the role of repression in the creation of publics. They argue that official national culture, which usually organizes the public sphere, designates certain acts as private and certain zones as queer. The concept of privacy works well in this capacity, cloaking, in their words, the ‘sexualization of national membership’. They advocate nothing less than ‘the changed possibilities of identity, intelligibility, publics, culture, and sex that appear when the heterosexual couple is no longer the referent or privileged example of sexual culture’, and seek to unsettle the ‘garbled but powerful norms’ supporting heteronormative hegemony.<sup>19</sup> Sex, as an intimate form of communication meant to occur privately, is everywhere supported by public discourses of health, family and morality that are supported in turn by institutions such as those tasked with providing education and justice: some of the apparatuses informed by and constitutive of spatial and epistemological closeting. Warner and Berlant’s discussion of the heteronormativity of the public sphere seems

19 Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant, ‘Sex in public’, in *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York, NY: Zone Books, 2002), pp. 187–8.

20 Ibid., p. 192.

21 Ibid., p. 193.

22 Lee Wallace, 'Continuous sex: the editing of homosexuality in *Bound* and *Rope*', in Jackie Stacey and Sarah Street (eds), *Queer Screen: a Screen Reader* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 122. See also: Cindy Patton's analysis of the slippage between 'gay' and 'communist' in 'To Die For', in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (ed.), *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1997), pp. 330–52; D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988).

23 This equation has long been identified in the *femmes fatales* of film noir. See E. Ann Kaplan (ed.), *Women in Film Noir*, revised and expanded edition (London: British Film Institute, 1998).

to unlock some of the significance of reticence of the two films. According to them, 'heterosexual culture achieves much of its metacultural intelligibility through the ideologies and institutions of intimacy'.<sup>20</sup> While 'sex in public' appears to be out of place, 'intimacy is itself publicly mediated'.<sup>21</sup> Their observations on the ambiguous place of sexuality in the public/private divide connect well to Sedgwick's analysis of the operation of the closet. Homosexuality is the repressed and absent centre of heteronormativity. Heterosexuality's 'normative metaculture', its utopian promise, is institutionally sustained despite all the evidence to the contrary. There is a ubiquity to the conflicting and confusing results of this combination of repression and institutionalized fantasy.

This repression of homosexuality demands alternate registers of signification. The trope of criminality is a common strategy. In her article 'Continuous sex: the editing of homosexuality in *Bound* and *Rope*', Lee Wallace observes that despite a separation of fifty years the films *Rope* and *Bound* both carry an erotic same-sex narrative on a storyline of criminality. 'Pictorial displacement and excess' is put in place of avowal and disclosure, making the films both more ambiguous and potentially more pleasurable to decode.<sup>22</sup> Something similar is at work in the films under examination here. Both films are characterized by textual excess that problematizes simple decoding. This takes the form of multiple, conflicting reenactments in *The Thin Blue Line* and of contradictory and sometimes incomprehensible home-movie footage in *Capturing the Friedmans*. Both films reflect on the production of criminality and allow viewers to consider the way cultural meaning slides from sexualities labeled 'deviant' into crime.<sup>23</sup> Unlike the fiction films Wallace discusses, however, the sexual pleasures of the stories in question are completely repressed, so that only the criminality remains. However, criminality itself is culturally linked with other kinds of transgression, and the association with sexuality is certainly there to be made.

One of the ways these films suppress an acknowledgement of the closet is through their reliance upon developmental theories of psychopathology, which replace cultural analysis with individual profiles. Towards the end of *The Thin Blue Line*, Morris includes a sequence about the childhood of David Harris, a convicted killer against whom Morris has built a case throughout the film in his attempt to exonerate Adams. In this sequence, Morris uses family snapshots to sketch a viable narrative of Harris's psychopathology. Harris himself, heard here in voiceover, uses the jargon of therapy to narrate his own story: the accidental death of his elder brother; his inability ever to please his father again; the birth of a new brother lavished with the paternal affection he felt he had missed. Crime, Morris shows with the flimsiest of psychological profiles, has become a means of gaining parental attention. In *Capturing the Friedmans* a similarly meagre story of family dysfunction is told to explain the pathologies of Arnold Friedman. His ex-wife Elaine relates the facts of Arnold's unhappy childhood: the

premature death of his sister; his parents' divorce; his subsequent overexposure to his mother's sexual life in their small basement apartment. In both films, past traumatic events are seen to shape a series of events in the present that have led the protagonists to the criminal justice system. Childhood traumas are intimated to operate as sites of abjection, shame and moral disfigurement residing at the heart of adult crimes.

Although ostensibly about the retrial of criminal cases, *The Thin Blue Line* and *Capturing the Friedmans* are also explorations of the entanglement of sexual life in the criminal justice system. However, the films' commitment to keeping certain sexual activities private – keeping matter in place – has a number of implications that should be considered. The films back away from challenging the norms of the public sphere as such, despite their tangential explorations of intimacy and heteronormativity. As I have argued, this produces a limited amount of illegibility. Utilizing supplementary strategies for representing what cannot be clearly depicted, the films are characterized by their excessive textual strategies – not really that unusual in relation to experimental documentary work on memory, as Janet Walker points out, but still unlike most work found in mainstream documentary films. The films both fall back upon the figure of the child and the therapeutic discourse of early trauma to indicate that something is not right in these worlds. This approach tends to focus on the individual stories of negligence and trauma and occludes the larger patterns of disfigurement endemic to the private sphere. In this way, both films avoid a more shocking conclusion: that these traumas are the very real effects of a symbolic world organized around the closet. The logic of heteronormativity embedded in state agencies produces the very transgressions and criminalities that are punished in public.

Instead, the filmmakers' emphasis on scapegoating and wrongful conviction tends to exonerate the system at large, dispersing the possibility of a coherent critique of the larger question of closeting. Nevertheless, part of the power of the films stems from their incomplete engagement with these larger issues. As investigations into and examples of the pervasive amnesia, hysteria and fantasies that are the symptoms of repression characteristic of the public sphere, the films offer at least an implicit critique of the invisible but structuring closet. It is their lack of closure that has made them so compelling.

In spite of themselves, perhaps, the films indicate the limits to the justice system's ability to cope with queer sexuality. Simultaneously, as forms of expression that address a public, the films themselves struggle to express fully the complexity of the events they are chronicling. The filmmakers approach the courtroom through the closet, as it were, telling stories about cases whose verdicts completed the trials but still left many questions unanswered. The challenge of decoding the films is partially the result of the ambiguities of their encoding, stemming from the queerly sexual aspects to the stories that cannot be reconciled with the films' primary roles as advocacy tools for the wrongly convicted.

Documentary film studies has become an exciting field in recent years precisely because documentary itself has undergone radical changes. The questions of entertainment and education in the mediated public sphere have extended and challenged ideas about documentary's state pedagogical and oppositional political formations, legacies from the early part of the twentieth century. Both *The Thin Blue Line* and *Capturing the Friedmans* are important texts in this new wave of documentary. What Williams notes about *The Thin Blue Line* is true for both films: they operate against the 'receding horizon' of the documentary tradition. While tangentially connected to public service and the publicity of criminal justice, they also have echoes of true crime, advocacy and confessional culture. The films work on a number of levels simultaneously and refuse to finalize the stories they explore. Both present a hidden story of past childhood abuse and family dysfunction in relation to the prosecution of crimes in the present, as though this is a key to understanding the events. But we are left thinking about the ways in which even the revelations of these hidden stories are but screen memories for much deeper anxieties.

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## The unanswered question of *Forrest Gump*

VICTOR FAN

For over a decade, the academic debate on *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994) has produced a *topos*: the film restages a series of traumatic events survived by spectators from the baby-boom generation between the 1950s and the 1980s as though they were personal memories of the protagonist Forrest Gump (Tom Hanks). These memories have not only been translated by reinterpretations and new understandings of such historical events and their political implications but also by the cinema and other media's repeated re-presentations of them as images. These historical events, I argue, are not traumas until we define them as such. Their physical occurrences, memories and reinterpretations have repeatedly reactivated a traumatic core that is inaccessible to us. The question 'what is this traumatic core?' remains perpetually unanswered. In this essay, I explore the function of Jenny Curran (Robin Wright) in relation to Forrest Gump and to the spectators from the baby-boom generation, with the intention of better understanding why these baby-boomers might find the film either too objectionable or too painful to watch.

I shall draw upon the idea of reactivation from a psychoanalytic concept that is current in critical debate on *Forrest Gump*: *Nachträglichkeit* (translated by Jean Laplanche as '*après coup*' and as 'afterwardness' in English). Based on discrete works by Sigmund Freud, Laplanche interprets *Nachträglichkeit* as a deposit of a sexual fantasy or trauma, whose action would be deferred and take effect later in the individual's life. Moreover, the concept 'presupposes that something is

1 Jean Laplanche, 'Notes on afterwordness', in John Fletcher (ed.), *Essays on Otherness* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 260–65.

2 Susannah Radstone, 'Screening trauma: *Forrest Gump*, film and memory', in Radstone, (ed.), *Memory and Methodology* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), p. 86; for a discussion of memory revision, see Sigmund Freud, 'Inhibitions, symptoms and anxiety', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XX*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1959), p. 142, fn. 1; see also Jean Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Karnac Books, 1988), pp. 465–73.

proffered by the other, and this is then afterwards retranslated and reinterpreted', a 'message of the other person' that 'demands to be deciphered'.<sup>1</sup> The unanswered question of *Forrest Gump* seems to be related to the accessibility of this 'message of the other', whose return reactivates, transforms and revises previous memories by new fantasies, 'pitting physical contingency against historical truth'.<sup>2</sup>

It is in this light that I reexamine Jenny's function in *Forrest Gump*. Who is Jenny and how might we interpret what she represents in *Forrest Gump* in terms of *Nachträglichkeit*? At first glance, Jenny appears to be Forrest's object of desire, who offers him an Oedipal resolution. In the manner of a classical Hollywood film, this sexually-transgressive woman is punished with an AIDS-like disease by the end of the film. She therefore succumbs to the Law of the Father (the Law that conceals and excludes the unliveable Real of the parricide and incest from subjectivity, which safeguards the subject's entry into heteronormative sexuality), which constitutes her as a mother substitute. Forrest's fantasy-memory of their wedding at the end of the film reactivates or invents an earlier fantasy-memory in which, in the middle of the night, Forrest walks onto the balcony of the quiet and empty house from which his mother is now absent and imagines Jenny emerging as a phantom who is 'coming home'. This fantasy will soon materialize, as Jenny appears on the horizon while Forrest is mowing his lawn. According to Forrest's fantasy-memory, Jenny sleeps for days, as though she were dead, and is then reborn from her countercultural and promiscuous past. She thus fully assumes the role of his mother as his sole companion inside a house that is left by the dead Father (and now also the dead mother). Together, they spend some of the best moments of their lives. In this sequence, the conflation between fantasy and memory is visually suggested by a cross-fade between a long shot of Jenny and Forrest watching the Fourth of July fireworks over a pond at the back of his house (a fantasy), and the closeup of the face of the Statue of Liberty on television as the backdrop of the Independence Day fireworks in New York City (a memory). Furthermore, in order to justify this episode in which Jenny surrenders to the Law of the Father earlier on in the film, Forrest fantasizes Jenny, who is high on heroin, climbing up to the ledge of the balcony of a high-rise apartment. Here, she attempts to realize her wish to fly like a bird away from her father, a thematic repetition of the scene on a bridge outside the strip club. But just as she is on the verge of falling, Jenny comes down from her intoxication, an awakening that is supposed to have prompted her return to Alabama. This fantasy-memory literally rescues her from being emancipated by the Law of the Father.

However, this fantasy-memory may be reread as a return of the repressed. How can Forrest see Jenny at a moment when he is not supposed to be able to see her? This vision of Jenny suggests that she is not really incorporated into the Law by the gaze of the Other (dead Father) as a mother substitute; rather, she is posited by the same gaze as a surplus. In this particular scene, her promiscuity and substance abuse are

- 3 See Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1992), p. 22.
- 4 Ibid.; Jacques Lacan, "Seminar on 'The purloined letter'", trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, in John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (eds), *The Purloined Poe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), pp. 28–54.
- 5 For the definition of the symptom, see: Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, *Studies on Hysteria*, trans. and ed. James and Alix Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1956), p. 71, fn. 1; Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, pp. 155–6; Jacques Lacan, 'Le sinthome. Séminaire du 13 avril 1976. Le réel est sans loi', *Onicar? Bulletin périodique du Champ freudien*, ed. Jaques-Alain Miller, no. 10 (1976–77), pp. 5–12. The debate on Lacan's notion of the symptom is closely tied to his analysis of Antigone. See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: the Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959–1960*, trans. Dennis Porter, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1992), pp. 243–87, and Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, pp. 91–2. While Lacan and Žižek argue that a symptom is necessarily female, Judith Butler argues that Antigone, being both sister and daughter of Oedipus, stands 'outside' the heteronormative relationship between femininity and masculinity. In this sense, Jenny, being a victim of her father's sexual abuse, can be considered analogous to Antigone, who insists upon her resistance to forming any relationship with the heteronormative order. See Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2000), pp. 68–82.

something in her that the gaze is not supposed to see, since her indulgence in 'excessive' pleasure precisely blocks the enjoyment of Forrest as a subject: a masochistic pain that the subject enjoys, which insists within the subject upon its independence from any relationship with the existence of the Other, and from the pleasure the Other guarantees. Hence, in this fantasy-memory, Jenny does not guarantee Forrest's pleasure by being a mother substitute; rather, she allows him to fantasize his pleasure by acting as a pain that blocks his complete enjoyment.<sup>3</sup>

One might indeed argue that throughout the film, Jenny herself is the return of the repressed. In the final sequence, Jenny first returns in the form of a letter after the television has shown the foiled assassination of Reagan (an event that marked the beginning of a period in which America attempted to restore the Law of the Father, and the family values that instantiate it). At the bus stop, Forrest proudly shows his letter to an old lady, and claims that Jenny saw him run on television. Again, Jenny, seeing him run on television, is presented as Forrest's surplus vision. Earlier, the film shows Jenny working as a waitress in a diner and overhearing, as she pours coffee for a customer, that Forrest is crossing the Mississippi – a 'vision' that Forrest is not supposed to 'see'. In this sense, the letter that is supposed to be sent by Jenny is fantasized, written, addressed and stamped by Forrest to be delivered to himself. Moreover, Forrest literally purloins (for Lacan, *pur-loigner*, or to put aside) this letter, putting it inside the suitcase he uses on his first day of school (the first time he meets or fantasizes Jenny), and for storing all his memorabilia (a time capsule which holds all his fantasies and memories awaiting reactivation). For Lacan, such a purloined letter would always be present in subjectivity, exposed for everyone to see. Nonetheless, as a signifier of its own absence, it is always hidden from the subject, who would not find it until she/he finds a purpose for it, that is, to maintain the imaginary consistency of subjectivity. Slavoj Žižek argues that the purloined letter is the surplus of enjoyment that is always in the subjectivity as a stain that blocks the complete fulfilment of the subject's enjoyment, a piece from the 'presymbolic Real' that the subject chooses not to see until she/he finds a purpose for it.<sup>4</sup>

As the purloined letter, Jenny is not really a mother substitute; rather, in Žižekian-Lacanian terms, she is a symptom. To understand this we must go back to Freud. For Freud, a symptom is a mnemonic symbol (a representation, or more properly in semiotics, a sign), a physical pain that an individual subconsciously connects to the fantasy-memory of the first scene of a trauma, which the individual has denied, repressed and refantasized. From a broader perspective, the first scene is none other than the primal scene. For Lacan and Žižek, a symptom is anything but a symbol of the primal scene; instead, it *is* the primal scene, the Real that resists symbolic articulation, a zone of lawlessness.<sup>5</sup>

In Forrest's reactivated and invented memories, Jenny seems to represent a zone of lawlessness, a force that resists any possible Oedipal

resolution according to the Law. Jenny's marriage proposal, which is supposed to allow Forrest to enter the heteronormative order of sexuality, merely restages the failure of Forrest's fantasized proposal after they have watched the Independence Day fireworks. In this scene, the idea of proposing to Jenny strikes him while he is sitting in the exact position in which he will receive Jenny's letter in the final sequence. As Jenny walks up the staircase, Forrest runs out of the television room and proposes to her, for the sole reason that he would make a good husband. Shot from a low angle, Jenny looks down at Forrest as though she were in authority, and agrees that Forrest would make a good husband but that he would not want to marry her. Forrest claims that, contrary to her belief, he does know what love is, a retort to a statement she made outside the strip club. In the following scene, that evening, Jenny enters Forrest's room of her own volition to acknowledge that she loves him and to initiate sex (this way, she still insists that she knows better than Forrest what love is). Here, Forrest is supposed to have become a man, as opposed to the boy who ejaculated too quickly in Jenny's dormitory. However, within the fantasy-memory of Forrest, Jenny blocks his passage to becoming a man by assuming the agency and authority to assert her pursuit of pleasure without being bound by the Law of the Father. In the final sequence, Jenny reasserts her agency by proposing to Forrest not so much for pleasure (suffering as she is from the AIDS-like disease will soon take that away), but precisely because he would make a good husband, and maintain the Name of the Father in form only.

Similarly, Forrest does not become a father; rather, Jenny authorizes him as such by naming him as the father of her son, even though, according to Forrest's fantasy-memory of her promiscuous past, there is no certainty that this is the case. When Jenny discloses her AIDS-like illness to Forrest, the camera gradually dollies behind her and Forrest, framing little Forrest between them in the background beyond its depth of field. This myopic image blurs little Forrest, as though Forrest were trying to erase his son from his family romance as he renarrativizes it. In spite of Forrest's claim that his son is the most beautiful thing he has ever seen, in this dolly shot, he refuses to see his son clearly as a physical body. Little Forrest is like an 'amorphous stain' that dissolves the illusion of his agency to become a father, a piece of the Real that returns to disallow his complete enjoyment.<sup>6</sup>

Has Jenny ever represented anything but a symptom? Like little Forrest, Jenny reemerges in Forrest's mind not as a physical body but returns to him as a stain, a voice that appears in his fantasy-memory that awaits his deliberate transference into what appears to be his object of desire, and a force that helps maintain his place inside the Law. When Forrest tries to recall the first time they met, he calls her a 'voice', which we first hear from the offscreen space when he is on the bus, before there is a cut to a shot of her. When Forrest is harassed by three boys on bicycles, Jenny turns into a voice that urges him to run for his life, a moment when he finally breaks free from the leg braces (the Law) put in

6 Žižek discusses the idea of a stain throughout his book, though the concept is best defined in his reading of Holbein's *Ambassadors*, in Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, p. 137.

7 See, for example: William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury: an Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Context Criticism*, ed. David Minter (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1994), and *Absalom, Absalom!: the Corrected Text* (New York, NY: Modern Library, 1993).

8 The idea of being 'banned from the Law' comes from Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

9 For an analysis of a woman's disembodied voice as a stain, see Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, pp. 1–2, 116–19.

10 Thomas Elsaesser, 'Hollywood and history: the poetics of parapraxis in *Forrest Gump*' (Unpublished manuscript: University of Amsterdam, 2006), p. 6; a revised version of this paper in German will be published as part of Elsaesser's *Hollywood Heute* (Berlin: Bertz + Fischer, 2008); the English version will be published as part of *Hollywood Time* (London: Routledge, 2008). My reference to Elsaesser's essay is based on his manuscript.

place by his doctor (a father-substitute), and allegorically dissolves the purposiveness of the Law. In the repetition of this scene, Jenny's voice urges Forrest to run away from the students, who ride a truck that displays a Confederate flag. Her voice has therefore in effect helped Forrest from persecution as a stain of the South, as though he were a man with 'a drop of Negro blood', the prototype of which signifies the degeneration of the Law of the Father.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Jenny's voice drives Forrest to enter the jungle in Vietnam twice to save his friends, and maintains the consistency of his relationship with the war and the imaginary concept of the nation. It also calls him across the Reflection Pool in Washington DC after his own voice has failed to deliver his message, an empty message that is appropriated by the protestors regardless of what it contains. Therefore, Jenny as a voice always rescues Forrest from being banned from the Law,<sup>8</sup> or from whichever political community he finds himself at odds.

In this light, Jenny's apparent corporeal presence may only be a fantasy-memory that Forrest invents in order to maintain his ontological consistency, and Jenny's excessive physicality is, in fact, too unbearable for Forrest to watch. When Jenny appears in *Playboy* magazine, her corporeality and its place as a commodified object of desire for men prompt him to travel to Memphis to see her show, which turns out to be in a strip club. Inside the theatre, Jenny's physical presence is so unbearable for Forrest that he has to walk up to the stage and take her away from it, only to find that his attempt to protect Jenny is, in turn, viewed by the audience as part of the act. Perhaps Jenny as an image does not exist; instead, Forrest borrows it from a *Playboy* magazine pinup in order to corporealize a disembodied voice that constantly urges him to suspend the Law of the Father.<sup>9</sup> His fantasies-memories of rescuing Jenny from her sexual and moral degradation are merely a series of performances to save himself from being banned from the Law.

Jenny is not only a stain for Forrest but also for the whole generation of baby-boomers. In the final sequence, one of the first things that Jenny does is to apologize for everything that she ever did to hurt Forrest because she believes that she was 'messed up'. Moreover, in the March on Washington, the ability of Jenny's voice to transform Forrest from a voiceless messenger from the war to a countercultural hero in front of the protestors seems to suggest that the countercultural movement itself is nothing but an empty message. For someone who has lived through the countercultural movement of the 1960s, Jenny's apology to Forrest, a man who always appears to defend American family values, seems to eradicate the ideals of those Americans 'who found solidarity in the fight . . . for which many were prepared to pay with their lives, in order to oppose the State, and for which they had to endure being labelled unpatriotic and treasonous'.<sup>10</sup> Is the film apologizing for the baby-boomers through the character of Jenny? If so, to whom and for what does she apologize?

Shot-by-shot breakdown off Burgoyne's scene

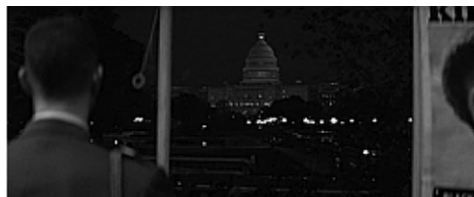


Fig. 1a



Fig. 1b



Fig. 1c



Fig. 2a



Fig. 2b



Fig. 2c



Fig. 2d



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

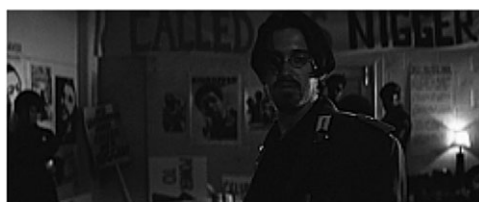


Fig. 8

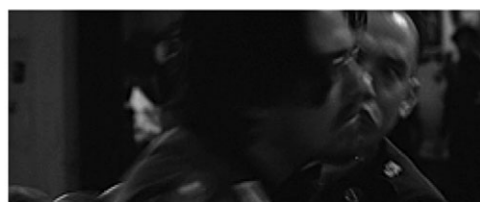


Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14



Fig. 15

11 Robert Burgoyne, *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at US History* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 114–15.

In the academic debate about *Forrest Gump*, Robert Burgoyne belongs to those baby-boomers who find the film's apologetic gesture offensive. He sees Forrest as a blank, innocent, unaffected and therefore all-encompassing white hero who reenacts and rewitnesses the countercultural movement so as to punish, and apologize for, its wrongdoings. Burgoyne analyzes the scene after the March on Washington in which the countercultural movement, embodied by Wesley, one of the leading protestors and Jenny's boyfriend at the time, is condemned as male misogyny disguised as civil rights and equality. He reads Forrest as a white Messiah, whose blankness allows him to embody a transhistorical sense of morality, who punches Wesley and knocks over a poster, which has the effect of inverting graphically and semiotically the Defiant Fist and the slogan 'Power to the People' (see figures 13 and 15). For Burgoyne, Forrest now represents the 'true' people, who bring justice by literalizing the Defiant Fist and punishing the countercultural movement that invented it in the first place: a 'perspective that substantially reorders the signs and meanings that have up to now defined the period'.<sup>11</sup>

If we analyze the scene more carefully along this line of thinking, the scene not only reconfigures all the semiotic values of the countercultural movement but, by mobilizing the theory of suture, we might also read it as incorporating spectators into the gaze of the Other and constituting them as anti-countercultural subjects.

The scene's semiotic inversion begins with the very first shot in the sequence and is carried out under the gaze of the Other throughout. In figure 1a, the rotunda of the United States Capitol, the embodiment of the gaze of the Other, stares into the camera, an empty field that is occupied by the spectators in the cinema. This empty field, a reminder that the gaze of the Other is staring at nothing or is impotent, is disavowed by Forrest's head in the foreground, which appears to look back at the Capitol. A Black Panther enters from right of frame and pulls the blind down (figure 1b). The gaze of the Other is now replaced by another kind of embodiment: the photos of Che Guevera and other revolutionary heroes. These heroes collectively double Forrest as a hero from another kind of war (the war in Vietnam). The Black Panther then pushes Forrest offscreen, towards the camera, and he verbalizes this dichotomy to the camera: 'Get your white ass out of here. Don't you know we're in a war here?' (figure 1c). This direct address to the empty field, which aims its question at the white baby-boomers among the spectators, fails to fulfil its countercultural function, as the castration threat of his look is immediately disavowed by a cut to the opposite field, where Forrest is searched and then lectured by another Black Panther (figure 2a). Wesley then enters this medium closeup and calls Forrest a baby-killer (figure 2b). The Black Panther reenters the frame from the background, intercepting Jenny's introduction of Wesley to Forrest as the president of the Berkeley chapter of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)

(figure 2c), as though these were labels that guarantee Wesley's political correctness without understanding or questioning what they stand for.

Forrest then gains his agency to objectify Jenny and punish Wesley's misogyny by a series of sutures around his look. In figure 2c, Forrest stares at Jenny while the Black Panther is lecturing. A smooth Steadicam move manoeuvres the camera to the right and turns around the bend to produce an over-the-shoulder shot of Forrest looking at Jenny, which disavows the empty field by suturing our look with Forrest's (figure 2d). Under Forrest's gaze, Jenny begins an argument with Wesley in the middle-ground. There is then a cut to a closeup of Forrest (figure 3), in which the voice and profile of the Black Panther suture the cut by giving us a sense of spatiotemporal continuity, a function they will continue to perform in the next few shots. The empty field towards which Forrest stares in this closeup is soon disavowed by a medium closeup of Jenny and Wesley, a shot taken with a longer lens and a consequently narrower depth-of-field, which simulates the way Forrest would look at the scene (figure 4). The film has by now established an imaginary continuous space as seen from the eyes of Forrest, through which we see Wesley hitting Jenny, his object of desire, motivating a cut to Forrest's reaction in the next shot (figure 5). Even though Forrest is looking directly at the camera, by now we have fully disavowed the empty field that could have threatened the imaginary continuity. The Steadicam moves in as though we were moving closer to Forrest's mind. There is a cut to a slow-motion shot of Jenny falling as subjectively perceived by Forrest (figure 6) and then one to a closeup of Forrest again (figure 7). The camera then backs up with Forrest as he walks forward towards Wesley as though we were walking with him. Now, there is a cut to a medium closeup of Wesley looking towards Forrest (figure 8), while the camera continues to simulate Forrest's walk by moving towards Wesley, and then there is a cut to a closeup of Forrest punching Wesley (figure 9). After this comes a cut to two seemingly objective shots shows the action and its impact (figures 10–11). In this sense, the film shows us that Wesley and his countercultural ideal are merely empty signifiers (like Berkeley and SDS). He is a misogynist who violates the gaze of the Other that ensures Forrest's entry into a heteronormative relationship with Jenny. Furthermore, the seeming objectivity of these last two shots is disavowed by a medium closeup of Jenny, which retroactively transfers Forrest's look to hers (figure 12). It is under the look of Jenny, a look of a countercultural participant who later apologizes to Forrest and us, that the Defiant Fist is turned upside down (figures 13 and 15).

Burgoyne's concern is that this fantasy-memory of the countercultural movement would replace the version remembered organically by those who participated in it, especially in the minds of those who were 'too young to have "been there"'.<sup>12</sup> His worry is primarily based on Alison Landsberg's concept of prosthetic memories: those memories, mediated by cinema, television and other media, which 'have no direct connection to a person's lived past and yet are essential to the production and

12 Elsaesser, 'Hollywood and history', p. 11.

13 Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: the Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 20–21.

14 Ibid.

15 Vivian Sobchack, 'Introduction: history happens', in Sobchack (ed.), *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1996), pp. 1–16. Sobchack's idea of the 'second chance' is a response to Roger Angell's comment on the film, which notes that the film does not offer its spectators the 'irony of American dream: the faith that we all belonged somewhere within a rational and forgiving system that in the end would reward intelligence and hard work'. See Angell, 'Two dreams: one gets Oscar's nod, the other gets gumped', *The New Yorker*, vol. 71, no. 3 (1995), p. 7.

16 Elsaesser, 'Hollywood and history', p. 13; Elsaesser has kindly elaborated to me the aspect of mutual agreement implied in the use of the term.

articulation of subjectivity'.<sup>13</sup> But Burgoyne's fear is primarily based on a misunderstanding of the way Landsberg employs this concept. For Landsberg, prosthetic memories do not simply erase or replace the organic ones; rather, they are best understood as competing memories that cinema, television or other media have commodified or disseminated, with which an individual would need to negotiate in order to understand her/his relationship with them, and with other people in the political community in question. In this sense, Landsberg hopes that the concept could 'produce empathy and social responsibility as well as political alliances that transcend race, class, and gender'.<sup>14</sup> This is a position supported by Vivian Sobchack, who proposes that since individuals do not necessarily understand their roles and positions as historical agents while 'history' is happening, the prosthetic memories that *Forrest Gump* presents would allow spectators, through their personal negotiations with them, a 'second chance' to grasp better the ethical implications of their roles in history.<sup>15</sup>

In this light, how can we reinterpret Jenny's apology whilst continuing to read her as a symptom of Forrest and the whole generation of baby-boomer? In one sense, the apology can be read as their acknowledgement of failure: 'We have not done enough'. Thomas Elsaesser suggests that *Forrest Gump* might be read as a parapraxis, or *Fehlleistung* (failed performance or, more popularly, Freudian slip). According to Elsaesser, 'there is always an element of *Leistung* [performance], of performance in the failed act, so that we are confronted with performance of failure as well as with failed performance'. For him, the term 'puts into a relation of reversibility both absence and presence, the missing and the representation (presence) of the missing'.<sup>16</sup> With this in mind, what Burgoyne interprets as a failed performance of the countercultural revolution, a failure he personalizes, is in fact also the film's performance of such failure. This performance not only requires those spectators who were too young to have been there to observe it, but also necessitates an acknowledgement, especially by the baby-boomers, that such performance has already failed. Thus the fight scene in the Black Panther office does require the suturing of the two action shots to the look of Jenny, for the film needs Jenny as an embodiment of a failed performance (of the countercultural movement) to witness the performance of failure (the inversion of the Defiant Fist and Wesley's display of misogyny). The acknowledgement of this failure to perform by both the baby-boomers, and those who were too young to have been there, is the necessary precondition for those things that Landsberg and Sobchack hope for: social empathy, collective redemption, and a new solution and mode of collaboration between people from different classes, races, genders and sexualities.

Equally, Jenny's apology can be reread as an attempt to suspend and dissolve the fictionality and the purposiveness of both the Law and her status as a symptom, that is, the imaginary origins of a subject's ontological consistency. To understand this notion, we can use the final

17 Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, p. 151. Žižek himself applies this concept to AIDS patients. *Ibid.*, p. 188, fn. 5; see also Lacan, *The Seminar*, pp. 270–83.

18 Elsaesser calls Forrest Gump a 'blank slate . . . that is too filled with information, a thoroughly overtaxed psyche, a profoundly disturbed organism'; he has a 'seriously traumatized body that protects itself from this possibly fatal self-knowledge thanks to an incorrigible naivety'. See Elsaesser, 'Hollywood and history', p. 9.

sequence of the film as a point of departure. In this final sequence, Forrest enters Jenny's room with a tray of breakfast. For a moment, he thinks that Jenny is dead, which motivates him to imagine her reawakening. He sits down next to her bed, and the perfectly healthy-looking Jenny asks him leisurely, 'Were you scared of Vietnam?' Her question enacts the failed performance of asking the spectators: 'Are you scared of AIDS?' or 'Are you scared of death?'. Between 1964 and the early 1990s, for baby-boomers and especially for gay men, there appear to have been only two ways to die: Vietnam or AIDS. As a baby-boomer, Forrest is, on the one hand, scared of death; on the other, he is not, because he realizes that he is supposed to be already dead but is excluded by the totality of death (or in Lacanian-Žižekian terms, caught between a fatal death that has already been executed and an actual biological death that is yet to come).<sup>17</sup>

Jenny's apology is therefore best understood as part of a purloined letter that she fails to deliver (as she says, she does not know how to put it). The apology is actually written by a baby-boomer who is excluded from death, who survives Vietnam and AIDS unscathed, someone who is exactly like Forrest. Nevertheless, like Forrest, he purloins it and attributes it to the symptom, the phantom that returns from death to ask him if he is scared of death. This apology should be read thus: 'I apologize for all I ever did to hurt myself, because no matter how much I did, I failed to die'. The frustration felt by both Forrest and the baby-boomers stems from their exclusion from the totality of death because they stand outside of the Law that defines human existence.

The baby-boomers' relationship with the film is closer to the way Forrest relates to his past. In this scene, facing a phantom who returns from an AIDS-related death, he imagines what appear to be a series of therapeutic flashbacks. Forrest fantasizes-remembers the glimmering starlit sky in the jungle, the sunset over the pier after a day's shrimping with Lieutenant Dan, running by a tranquil lake, and another sunset in Monument Valley. These fantasies have the effect of allowing Forrest to survive by effacing all the memories of death that surround him in Vietnam, the death of Bubba from whom he inherits the business, the death of his mother that motivates him to run and, eventually, Jenny's death. In this sense, Forrest, a fully traumatized subject, refuses therapy.<sup>18</sup>

What is the implication of a patient who needs therapy refusing it? In 1916, Freud wrote about a clinical exception he calls *Versagung* (frustration). For Freud, the general principle of psychoanalysis as a curative procedure is to ask patients to give up some of the pleasures that are symptomatic of the traumatic memories. By surrendering these pleasures, the patients would be able to rationalize their traumas which would generate a higher form of pleasure than those the mind invented in order to alter the states of their traumatic memories. It surprised Freud that there were patients who refused to surrender and considered the psychoanalytical process of uncovering their traumatic memories too much to bear. However, while Freud considers such frustration a form of

<sup>19</sup> Freud, 'Some character-types met with in psycho-analytic work', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957), pp. 309–33. For Žižek's version of *Versagung*, see Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, p. 167. Here, Žižek's idea refers to Walter Benjamin's concept of 'mythical violence'. See Walter Benjamin, 'Critique of violence', in *Selected Writings, Volume I: 1913–1926*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 248–52.

<sup>20</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 88.

negativity, I argue that it is a positive line of escape based on Žižek's notion of *Versagung*. By refusing therapy, these patients resist the attempt of Freudian psychoanalysis to impose on them the Law of the Father as an interpretive framework, and resist any attempt to reestablish their relationship with the Law in order to generate a 'higher form of pleasure'. Thus they refuse to conform to the Law and the parricide as the epistemological framework that defines their fantasies-memories as traumas. Such resistance allows them to combat the Father (whose Law used to define their fantasies-memories as traumas) as mere lives that completely take on the guilt of defying the dead Father, a challenge to the authority of death without being mediated by the Law, an ultimate elimination of the Father.<sup>19</sup>

The unanswered question of *Forrest Gump* remains unanswerable as long as we stay within the language of the Law. By reading Jenny as a symptom, we can now see that not only does she resist offering Forrest any form of Oedipal resolution, but the meaning and purposiveness of the parricide and incest are also questioned by her return as the repressed. After all, she is a purloined message, fantasized, deposited, written, addressed and stamped by the subject her/himself in the Name of the Father, in order to protect the ontological consistency of Forrest, and the baby-boom generation. Once we can 'recognize' Jenny as a symptom, the meaningfulness of 'trauma' and the 'traumatic core' (parricide and incest) that defines it can be dissolved. In the end, the 'real' trauma is a frustration: when an individual should be dead, though she/he is excluded from its totality, neither death nor the Law that protects her/him from a complete ontological disintegration is purposeful, allowing her/him to be protected by a word that does not bind.<sup>20</sup> *Forrest Gump* is too objectionable or too painful for baby-boomers to watch precisely because these spectators, being caught between two deaths, or excluded from the totality of death, refuse therapy. Instead, they choose a direct face-to-face combat with death without any mediation by the Law, a line of resistance that dissolves the need for the Father once and for all. In the very final scene of the film, Forrest sees his son off to school. On the school bus, little Forrest meets little Jenny and the romance continues. Forrest, however, turns himself into an unplugged automaton, for the purposiveness of his existence, and the Law that gives it consistency, is from now on suspended in perpetuity.

## The Women's Film History Project and Women and the Silent Screen

KAY ARMATAGE

In the beginning, there was the 1978 Brighton conference. This was the catalyst for a renewed scholarly interest in cinema's early years and the installation of film theory within film history. About a decade after the turn to the 'new historicism' in mainstream film studies, groundbreaking publications in women's film history began to emerge. Kay Sloan focused on a number of women directors in *The Loud Silents: Origins of the Social Problem Film*,<sup>1</sup> and in *Unheimlichkeit des Blicks*,<sup>2</sup> Heide Schlupmann analyzed early cinema in Wilhelmian Germany, highlighting a potential for oppositional women's perceptions.<sup>3</sup> Miriam Hansen's *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*<sup>4</sup> offered an expanded view of the historicity of women in the silent screen era, and the first book-length study of a single woman director from the silent era came with Giuliana Bruno's *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map*,<sup>5</sup> a seminal work that synthesized theories of feminine subjectivity and representation with film history and production. Cultural studies opened new vistas, decentring the filmic text to 'make way for a more open, dispersed and non-linear field of research in which film is studied as an intersection of a range of discourses that circulate through a culture, a shift which leads to investigations of representation, reception and production through intertextual, intermedial, and contextual perspectives'.<sup>6</sup> Shelley Stamp's *Movie Struck Girls*<sup>7</sup> took up Hansen's baton along with cultural studies methodologies, and the book's title became a catchphrase in studies of spectatorship in the silent era. The *camera obscura* special issue on early women stars edited by Diane

- 1 Kay Sloan, *The Loud Silents: Origins of the Social Problem Film* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988).
- 2 Heide Schlupmann, *Unheimlichkeit des Blicks* (Basel: Stroemfeld/Roter Stern, 1990).
- 3 Annette Förster and Eva Warth, 'Feminist approaches to early film history: an overview', *Tijdschrift voor Mediageschiedenis*, vol. 2, no. 1 (1999), pp. 114-27. This article tipped me off to European texts which have not been translated into English.
- 4 Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).
- 5 Giuliana Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map: Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).
- 6 Förster and Warth, 'Feminist approaches', p. 118.
- 7 Shelley Stamp, *Movie Struck Girls* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

8 *camera obscura*, vol. 16, no. 3 (2001).

9 Jennifer Bean and Diane Negra (eds), *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

10 All but two of the contributors have appointments at US universities; all but two of the articles take US film production as their locus.

11 Bean and Negra (eds), *A Feminist Reader*.

Negra<sup>8</sup> was followed by *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*,<sup>9</sup> a giant tome that presents the groundswell of US scholarship on early cinema.<sup>10</sup> Kino International and Milestone concurrently released videos of silent films by women directors, and independent documentaries about early women filmmakers appeared in profusion, for example, *The Lost Garden: the Life and Cinema of Alice Guy Blache* (NFB, 1995) and *Reel Models: the Women of Early Film* (American Movie Classic, 2000). A new movement in feminist film scholarship and production was underway with a generation of women scholars who had been trained in film studies and were bent on making a mark on the discipline.

As Jennifer Bean intimates in the 'Introduction' to *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*,<sup>11</sup> Jane Gaines had already been busy in the field. Gaines started the Women Film Pioneers Project (based at Duke University and coordinated by Radha Vatsal) and convinced Turner Classic Movies to programme a series of women's silent films (screened in August 2000 in the USA), for which she provided introductory commentaries and discussions of the roles of women directors and producers in early cinema. Gaines also formed a partnership with Joan Catapano, the esteemed former editor of Indiana University Press who had moved to University of Illinois Press. Together they inaugurated a series of 'Women Film Pioneers' sourcebooks, their ambitious mandate a global survey of women working in the silent era film industry. The Women Film Pioneers project and Women and the Silent Screen series of conferences began to take off, fortifying an already substantial surge of feminist research activity.

The first conference, Gender and Silent Cinema, was held at Utrecht University in 1999, organized by Annette Förster (Utrecht University), Heide Schlupmann (J.W. Goethe University, Frankfurt) and Eva Warth (Utrecht University). It attracted substantial sponsors, allowing the organizers to pay for everything, not only meals and hotels but also flights for invited contributors from abroad – these days an unknown luxury. From the schedule, Gender and Silent Cinema appears to have been a leisurely event – four days, the first just 'welcome drinks' and the second, starting at noon, requiring only registration, coffee, four hours of screenings and a reception. The meat of the conference began on the third day, with three keynote lectures by Vicki Callahan (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee), Heide Schlupmann and Kay Sloan (Miami University of Ohio), followed by screenings and dinner. Day four included three more keynote lectures, by Förster, Alison McMahon (director of *The Lost Garden*) and Shelley Stamp (University of California, Santa Cruz), and, after lunch, a final roundtable discussion followed by farewell drinks and dinner. It is impossible to tell from the schedule what historiographical quandaries, movements or figures were discussed, as the lecture titles are all generic, but clearly this conference, with its stellar guests, reflected an impressive intervention.

12 Author of, among other books, *Without Lying Down: Frances Marion and the Powerful Women of Early Hollywood* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1998).

13 Anthony Slide, *Early Women Directors* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1977).

The screening schedule of Gender and Silent Cinema was wonderful, featuring films from the Netherlands Film Museum's collection, including *Her First Cigaret* (American Mutoscope and Biograph, 1899), *Two Little Rangers* (Alice Guy Blache, Solax, 1912), the incomplete *Shoes* (Lois Weber, 1916) and *Crafts of the Baro-Bataks* (Netherlands, 1917). Screenings at subsequent conferences have also presented rare archival treasures.

Since Utrecht, the Women and the Silent Screen conferences have adopted the North American conference model and its economic exigencies. At University of California, Santa Cruz in 2002 (coordinated by Shelley Stamp and Amelie Hastie), there were parallel sessions with panels of up to four twenty-minute papers and participants paid their own way. Keynote speaker Cari Beauchamp<sup>12</sup> told of many struggles to access the relevant archives – a consistent theme in every subsequent conference – and to trace nuances of relationships and behaviours from veiled allusions in letters and memoirs. One detail I remember vividly was Beauchamp's account of how she went through every single studio payslip and matching dates with Francis Marion's postcards and letters, to discover that she had had a 'friend' in the payroll department who continued to pay Marion's salary even while she was on hiatus or vacation.

The Santa Cruz conference set the tone for the explosion of categories and novel historiographical methodologies that have characterized scholarship in this area ever since. Gaines's keynote lecture on the first night covered American stars, Italian divas, screenwriters, editors and cinematographers as well as many of the known women directors from the silent era. Because women directors were relatively few in the silent era – although still proportionately greater in number than in any other period of the industry – many scholars have sought out other forms of women's industrial participation: not only producers, screenwriters, authors of adapted texts, stars and editors (credits one step down from received notions of authorship in standard film history) but also critics, exhibitors and boarding houses for aspiring starlets, not discounting Anthony Slide's tribute to the women who hand-tinted the monochrome prints.<sup>13</sup>

This gender-based scholarship acknowledges the turn to the new historicism but inflects the movement with innovative historiographical and critical questions, not only of gendered spectatorship and consumption but also of attribution, contemporaneous criticism, forms of publicity and star construction, institutional structures and practices of film production, material forms of both professional and domestic labour, and wider mappings of industrial geographies. In their turn, these issues have necessitated inventive research methods. In addition to the now *de rigueur* utilization of publicity materials, fan magazines, trade publications, local newspaper reviews and gossip columns as evidence of the construction of stars as well as indications of spectator reception and consumption practices, some scholars have employed original methods to enter the lost worlds of their research objects. Hastie, for example,

<sup>14</sup> Expanded texts are now available in Hastie's delightful book, *Cupboards of Curiosity: Women, Recollection, and Film History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007). A selection from the Santa Cruz conference papers has been published in a special issue of *Film History*, vol. 18, no. 2 (2006).

<sup>15</sup> Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: British Film Institute, 1998).

served fudge she had made from Zazu Pit's recipes to illustrate her research on the construction of stars through domestic memorabilia.<sup>14</sup> As in Hastie's work, since the *camera obscura* special issue on early women stars, a marked theme of the Women and the Silent Screen conferences has been star studies, a terrain that was first mined by Richard Dyer<sup>15</sup> and has since been inflected with questions of studio publicity emphasizing feminine domesticity or its alternative, diva celebrity.

Meanwhile, Gaines and Radha Vatsal (coordinator of the Women Film Pioneers Project) were also on the case. They had compiled a list of scholars working in the silent era, their research objects and tentative filmographies, and were heading towards the first Women Film Pioneers Sourcebook covering the USA and Latin America. The sourcebook guidelines present the project overview:

the general goal of these sourcebooks is to jump-start historical research as well as theoretical work. Another aim is to encourage a collaborative approach among a global network of researchers as part of a public reconfiguration of world film knowledge.

The individual entries are to consist of a Critical Career Profile of each Woman Film Pioneer, accompanied by a selected filmography, bibliography, list(s) of primary archival sources (paper and film print), and representative documents and images.

In line with the radical historiographical approaches being developed by feminist researchers, the sourcebook guidelines offer methodological freedoms:

this project is a response to the writings of an earlier generation of film historians who sounded authoritative. We are giving you the license to think more creatively about the difficulties of this research, and to boldly question previous historical accounts.

The potential interrogations include where findings diverge from existing accounts, availability of sources (standard histories, trade publications, and so on) and print material collections (private or public), percentage of films extant, where new research should begin and what questions should be asked.

The third conference of Women and the Silent Screen was hosted by Concordia University, Montréal in 2004 and coordinated by Catherine Russell and Rosanna Maule. By this time, distinguished scholars Christine Gledhill, Annette Kuhn and Lauren Rabinowitz had joined the party. The conference wrapup, chaired by Gaines, agreed by consensus to change the title of the project from Women Film Pioneers to Women's Film History Project, to acknowledge the expansion of the scope of potential research into the sound era. This was especially important to the Canadians at the conference, for whom – aside from Nell Shipman, Mary Pickford, a few exhibitors and critics, and the Québec Catholic fathers who had confiscated offensive prints – women's film history in Canada had effectively begun with the founding of the National Film

16 University of Illinois Press,  
forthcoming 2009.

Board in 1939 and the hiring of producer/directors such as Evelyn Spice Cherry, Gudrun Parker and Red Burns.

Guadalajara University, Mexico, hosted the fourth conference in 2006, coordinated by Patricia Torres San Martin and Joanne Hersfield. Everyone came to sunny Guadalajara, a city small enough to be manageable on foot, with gracious squares, colonial arcades and fabulous restaurants at every turn. We all stayed at one hotel in the centre, so there were free-floating gatherings over margaritas in the lobby each evening, facilitating the cementing of collegial connections, publishing contacts and friendships that is as much a function of a conference as scholarly inspiration. We were taken by bus to the campus every morning to benefit from the up-to-the-minute facilities of a modern suburban university. By 2006 our ranks had increased to require three parallel sessions. In addition to the regulars (Bean, Callahan, Monica Dall'Asta, Gaines, Maule, Stamp, Yiman Wang), we were joined by venerated historian Richard Abel and newcomer Mark Garrett Cooper, fresh from the completion of his manuscript on Universal Women.<sup>16</sup>

One of the persistent problems in research on women from the silent film industry is that of attribution of authorship. As we know from the famous cases of Lois Weber and Nell Shipman, husbands/partners were often given codirector or director credit. Shipman routinely gave director credit to her lover Bert Van Tuyle, although she wrote the scripts, produced (the crew consisted of her friends and contacts from her past as a studio contract actor) and edited the films. At the Stockholm conference in 2008, Isabel Arredondo added a new wrinkle to the issue of authorial attribution by comparing Juliett Barrett Rublee's script for *Flame of Mexico* (1932) with Eisenstein's *¡Que Viva Mexico!* (1932). 'What narrative did the historical "forgetting" of women allow in film history?', Arredondo asked. The fundamental question of her paper was thus the assignation of authorship.

Stockholm, coordinated by Astrid Soderbergh Widding and Sofia Bull, was charged with new personnel. Many of the North American recipients of research grants were there, but the conference was enriched by scholars from all over Europe (Bologna, Florence, Helsinki, Istanbul, Cologne, Paris, Sunderland, Zurich) and papers on early women's film production in China, Czechoslovakia, the Philippines, Turkey and Russia, to cite just a few. Expanded historical mappings seized an increasingly global movement in feminist scholarship.

Along with the many star studies and matters of authorial attribution, the major scholarly focus of the Stockholm conference was archival research. Although historical research has always depended upon archival access, some new beats of this conference were unusual archival excavations, the absence of archives, archival ephemera and fragments, and archival heroism (a tribute to Barbara Hall, doyenne of the Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, by Abel, Cooper and Jennifer Horne).

- 17 W.K.L. Dickson and Antonia Dickson, *History of the Kinetograph, Kinetoscope and Kinetograph* (1894, facsimile edition Museum of Modern Art, 2001).

In her keynote talk at Stockholm, 'Women and the cinematification of the world', Gaines took on original topics. She began her wide-ranging purview with quotations from a 1926 article that asserted that cinema exists for the pleasure of women. From this gratifying thought, and the subsequent complaint from her source that there was too much love and marriage onscreen, too much sugar and not enough reality, Gaines explored notions of 'reality' brought to us by the cinema (Lumière actualities, social realities and spectators' worlds) with a dazzling array of sources, including Deleuze, Gertrude Stein, Godard and Antonia Dixon.<sup>17</sup> Gaines cautioned against the dangers of utopianism, to which women are as susceptible as George Lucas, whom she quoted as saying (more or less) that everything is possible and not antithetical to reality. She concluded by using Dyer's theory of the historicity of feelings to frame the question 'Are they us?'. This question is particularly interesting, since although we have to take an academic view of the past, resisting impulses to conflate contemporary attitudes with cultures different from our own, I have long found the estrangement of contemporary women from aspiring and ambitious career women of an earlier period to be lacking in empathy. 'Are they us?' Why on earth not? Were they encountering new technological and career possibilities; did they have geographical horizons opened to them through new channels of communication and travel; were they struggling for political and economic equality; did they have professional and domestic problems with their partners; were they any more or less anxious than we about change, opportunity, exploitation, domestic violence, public danger; and were they less hopeful of the best outcomes?

- 18 Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981)

On a methodological note, in Stockholm I had a conversation with Vicki Callahan about the 'explosion of categories' that is such a concern in gendered film research. In tune with a long history of scholarship and practice, dating from the well-known warnings of Griselda Pollock against the simplistic urge to interpolate women into mainstream history,<sup>18</sup> Callahan is committed to this intervention – historiographically necessary, she asserts. At the same time, the academic sidelining of her colleague Leslie Thornton and other women filmmakers of the avant garde outrages her. Callahan's lament reminded me of Joyce Weiland's long-time exclusion from Jonas Mekas's New York Film Archives. And yet again, my current complaint, why should we not expect women filmmakers to be included in contemporary scholarship, years later in terms of research and teaching?

By 2010, the first volume of the Women Pioneers Sourcebook promises to be available, and the second volume will be well underway. The Women's History Project is now a dynamic decade-long project of scholarship that is reshaping film history, and a magnificent group of feminist scholars who look forward to the next Women and the Silent Screen conference, promised for Bologna.

## European Network for Cinema and Media Studies Conference. Budapest, 19–22 June 2008

TIM BERGFELDER and SARAH STREET

This was the second annual conference for the European Network for Cinema and Media Studies (NECS). NECS is one of the most significant international groupings of screen and media studies scholars to have emerged in recent years. Since its foundation in February 2006, the non-profit organization has grown considerably, with a total of 174 members from twenty-two countries in June 2007 rising to 395 from thirty-seven countries a year later. While at present Germany (19%) and Britain (15%) make up the majority, the rest of the membership cover a wide geographical range, including Brazil, China, New Zealand, Pakistan and South Korea, while delegates from Scandinavian and Central/Eastern European countries form two significant clusters. This broad constituency reflects the network's aim of encouraging exchange between scholars, archivists and programmers from many different nationalities in order to 'stimulate new developments and create a public for new concepts and ideas which will secure our discipline a place as an innovative engine of the humanities'.<sup>1</sup>

While many researchers within the group work on European cinema, the network does not confine itself solely to this subject area, declaring on its website: 'Our aim is the integration and prosperity of Europe and its cinema(s) without limiting the scope of our activities to European cinema and media'. Assisted by the benefits of an active website, NECS provides members with regular updates on forthcoming conferences,

<sup>1</sup> URL: <http://www.necs-initiative.org>

journal calls for papers and other general information in the broad discipline of screen studies, as well as a forum for posting publications.

An interesting feature is the formation of workgroups which gather together scholars interested in particular themes, including affects and audiovisual cultures; avant garde(s) and new wave(s); characters and persons in audiovisual media; digital cinema; film festival research; film industries; industrial, science and utility film research group; screenwriting; sexual representation; teaching materials; television industries and audiences. At the annual conference, those who have joined the various workgroups online meet to discuss the sharing of resources, scholarly materials and plans for research funding applications. Indeed, the broad geographical constituency of NECS seems to thrive on the opportunities it presents for the formation of specific sub-networks, bringing together people with similar interests who might otherwise find it difficult to make contact and sustain collaboration. Again, quoting from the website, NECS aims 'to foster exchange across national, cultural and linguistic boundaries' and 'to deepen and intensify cooperation in order to make truly comparative work possible'. Indeed, the dominant rhetoric informing NECS is resonant with the themes of crosscultural exchange, collaboration and cooperation which, on a broader intellectual level, represent 'the turn' towards the postnational.

The two conferences, each with somewhat broad titles, 'Perspectives and Challenges for Cinema and Media Studies' (Vienna, 2007) and 'New and Old Frames' (Budapest, 2008) have attracted an extremely wide range of delegates and subjects, ranging from transnationalism in Indian cinema, film aesthetics, the future of television studies, and the many and varied impacts of digital media. In Budapest, the chosen keynote speakers reflected the conference's broad reach and its aim to encompass academia as well as archival institutions. Silent cinema scholar William Uricchio opened the conference with his 'Reflections on a medium in transition', covering questions of archival priorities and new communication technologies in the new millennium. The second keynote speaker, Ivan Klimes of the Czech National Film Archive in Prague, represented both the sizeable Central European contingent and the interests and concerns of the archivist community. Pierre Sorlin's plenary address drew on early sociological (Emilie Altenloh and Georg Simmel) and psychological (Hugo Münsterberg) studies of the impact of cinema in order to consider whether cinema produced a change in our perception of the world. It is perhaps hardly surprising that an affirmative conclusion was drawn, through examples that emphasized the historicity of perception.

Given the range of different nationalities present, the research methodologies, theoretical paradigms and wider intellectual concerns presented across the four days were remarkably consistent and compatible, suggesting a supranational approach to cinema and media studies. Equally, there were often demonstrable links between

workgroups and panels, for example a panel on concepts and contexts of film production was clearly relevant to the primary concerns of the film industries workgroup. One paper on this panel detailed the problems facing the contemporary Turkish film industry, in particular the Antalya Studios which have failed to expand or become a site for international film production; another paper concentrated on trends towards regionalism in Swedish film production. A new feature at Budapest was the inclusion of three workshops: the first reported on a two-year project geared towards training doctoral students in using film archives; the second concentrated on online archives; the third on methodological challenges informed by a group of academics who have researched film exhibition and culture in cities, involving methods applied by local historians. As became clear in the closing annual general meeting, NECS is not standing still and the group's enthusiasm and ambitions were palpable – there are plans for an online and print peer-reviewed journal and to establish a graduate student committee.

As well as offering a lively platform for academic exchange via the provision of the website and annual conference, on a more pragmatic level the growth of NECS in a relatively short time is partly explained by its low-cost membership fee of twenty euros (ten for students). Thanks to the sponsorship of the University of Bochum (at which the majority of the steering committee is located) and additional local backers for each conference, other costs are kept down: for example there is no registration fee for members attending the annual conference. As previously in Vienna, local organization, resources and hospitality in Budapest were impeccable, amply showcased in the lavish evening receptions which set standards future conferences may find difficult to live up to.

Next year's conference venue, meanwhile, is already confirmed – the host will be the University of Lund in Sweden. In discussions about future venues, however, national differences became evident. For example, whereas Higher Education institutions in the UK regularly charge for the use of conference facilities, resulting in substantial registration fees for delegates, this practice seems less common in the rest of Europe. Conversely, delegates from the UK and the USA find it easier than their European colleagues to have their travel costs refunded by their employing institution. One can assume that the bridging of these different institutional practices across borders (which extend to other areas, including collaborative research projects) will constitute one of the main challenges for NECS in the coming years.

## Beginnings and Endings in Films, Film and Film Studies. University of Warwick, 13 June 2008

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It is customary to begin a conference report with an overview of the subject area under consideration in order to define the contribution that the event has made to the field and to suggest any further avenues of enquiry it has indicated. Organized by University of Warwick postgraduates Tom Hughes and James MacDowell, this conference's specific ambitions somewhat preclude such an approach, as it attempted neither to establish nor to intervene in one individual field. Instead, the day's proceedings sought to promote intellectual exchange across different branches of film studies by thinking critically about the varying notions of beginnings and endings that frame many of our divergent scholarly engagements with the medium. Whilst to some extent this prevented the conference from formulating unified outcomes, it did succeed in demonstrating the importance of always being cognizant of these boundaries in our various approaches to the study of film.

The organizers' welcoming speech, given by Hughes, set out the case for employing beginnings and endings as a framework for intellectual enquiry, citing Frank Kermode's theorization of the need felt by humankind to bring order to the contingent and disorganized yet steady flow of passing time through the imposition of fictive structures marked by beginnings, middles and endings.<sup>1</sup> For the conference organizers, whilst Kermode teaches us to recognize the constructed and thus unfixed nature of start and end-points, he also demonstrates their fundamental importance to our understanding of the world around us. With this in mind, the three panels of the conference – 'Films', 'Film' and 'Film and

<sup>1</sup> Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1967).

Television Studies' – were designed to explore the ways in which beginnings and endings have an impact on our respective understanding of individual films, the history and evolution of the film medium and our own approaches to the interpretation of audiovisual texts.

Perhaps the area in which notions of beginning and ending have most clearly impinged upon our engagement with the film medium is that of cinema history. Film historians traditionally attempted to bring a sense of order to the development of the art of filmmaking through periodization. Today, as digital technologies become ever more pervasive, it is possible that the dominance of film as a specific material medium is coming to a close. Debates about this possible shift and the potential effects it may have on the language of cinema possess clear parallels with those that surrounded the coming of sound eighty years ago. The two papers which comprised the 'Film' panel examined films stemming from these two analogous periods, asking how best we should address the historical development of cinema and assessing the usefulness of studying film in terms of periods at all.

The panel's opening paper, presented by Paul Cuff (University of Warwick), addressed Abel Gance's first sound film, the critically deplored *La Fin du Monde* (1931). Whilst accepting that the coming of sound spelt the beginning of the end for Gance's career, Cuff rejected the easily grasped, and thus commonly perpetuated, explanatory narrative of a silent director unable to adapt to the new cinematic language of talking film. Instead, Cuff revealed clear aesthetic continuity between Gance's preceding film, the silent masterpiece *Napoleon* (1927), and *La Fin du Monde*, highlighting the employment of elaborate stylistic devices in both films as a means of drawing the audience into the psychological drama onscreen. Gance was always a director with famously grand ambitions for the cinematic apparatus and, for Cuff, the disappointment of his first sound film was not so much a case of a director failing to deal with technology but of technology failing to deal with him.

Whilst Cuff's approach implicitly revealed the limitations of uncomplicatedly structuring film histories around a linear chronology of distinct periods determined by the dominance of particular technologies or cinematic languages, Michael Pigott's (University of Warwick) subsequent paper explicitly proposed an alternative model which, he argued, was able to account for the true complexities of cinematic evolution, that of the feedback loop. Here, the output of a particular system is fed back in to the start of the system as input. Using textual analysis of recent films *Children of Men* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2006) and *Cloverfield* (Matt Reeves, 2008) as well as contemporaneous video games premised upon the provision of a first-person viewpoint, Pigott demonstrated one such feedback loop in action, the two films borrowing stylistically, as well as in the type of viewer involvement sought, from video games which themselves had appropriated and reimagined certain aesthetic devices from the cinema. As Pigott argued, the feedback loop, which can be used on a broader level to theorize the current reciprocal

relations of influence between analogue and digital technologies in cinema, allows for a more nuanced account of the interrelations between different aesthetic modes than a model founded on a linear series of beginnings and endings permits.

Andrew Klevan (University of Oxford) began the preceding panel ('Film and Television Studies') by posing the question of where our interpretations should begin and when they should end. Discussing the seemingly ceaseless returns to particular cinematic moments in Stanley Cavell's film criticism, Klevan argued against closing off our interpretations too early, either by implementing a particular system, method or theory prematurely or by assuming a comprehensive knowledge of even those filmic moments with which we are most familiar. For Klevan, Cavell's criticism demonstrates the revelatory value of simple description free from the constrictions of preconceived theoretical frameworks, and teaches us how we can always renew and enrich our interpretations of filmic moments by returning to them from new directions or perspectives.

Charlotte Brunsdon's (University of Warwick) following paper itself revealed the benefits of returning to previous objects of study, demonstrating what can be learnt from re-examining long-form television drama from the British three-channel era as it reappears in the new, 'binge-able' form of the DVD box-set. With the arrival of the DVD box-set, previously unavailable series, originally conceived to be watched over a period of weeks, are suddenly available to consume in one unbroken sitting. For Brunsdon, viewing such series in this format brings into sharp focus the degree to which the aesthetics of pre-multi-channel era long-form drama were defined by their medium. Suggesting that the pace of narrative development in drama series from this earlier period typically responded to the series' weekly position in the television schedules, evolving gradually as if in some articulation with real life, Brunsdon argued that for a bingeing viewer, less accustomed to the withholding of narrative pleasures, such strategies become unpalatable and thus more consciously identifiable.

The outcomes of Brunsdon's paper pointed towards the need for further research into the precise nature of DVD bingeing and the possible effects of this phenomenon on the production of television drama in the contemporary era. Popular American series of today such as *24* (2001- ) and *Lost* (2004- ) also indulge in the deliberate withholding of narrative information. Most typically this occurs across episodes through the deployment of cliffhangers. It is entirely possible that these intentionally unsatisfying episode conclusions are designed partly with bingeing viewers in mind, producers now fully aware of the commercial potential of box-sets as well as the somewhat guilty pleasures of immediate narrative satisfaction that they can provide.

The final panel of the day ('Films') comprised three papers focused on the opening and closing sequences of individual films. Whereas the first paper closely examined two film openings and the second dealt with one

- 2 Douglas Pye, 'Movies and tone', in John Gibbs and Douglas Pye (eds), *Close-Up 02* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007), pp. 1–80.

- 3 André Bazin, 'Cabiria: the voyage to the end of neorealism', in *What Is Cinema?: Volume Two*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1971), pp. 83–92.

- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 90.

- 5 Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in Film and Television* (London: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 76.

renowned film ending, both highlighting the key importance of the start and end points of individual narratives to our interpretations of their overall projects, the final paper of the day asked how closure functions across movie franchises, series of films that have to manoeuvre their way through a whole succession of beginnings and endings. Drawing on Douglas Pye's recent work on film tone, Lucy Fife's (University of Reading) analysis of the role played by tone in the opening sequences of George A. Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1979) and *Day of the Dead* (1985) neatly demonstrated the importance of a film's opening moments to the relationship that its viewer forms with both the fictional world on screen *and* the attitude that the film itself is taking to the material presented.<sup>2</sup> Following Fife, Tom Brown (University of Reading) examined the direct look into the camera of lead character Cabiria in the final shot of Federico Fellini's *Le Notti di Cabiria/Nights of Cabiria* (1957). Offering an account of this moment of direct address in relation to the pattern of narrative events that precede and, in the speaker's view, determine it, Brown also attempted to position the shot in relation to what André Bazin has termed Fellini's 'voyage to the end of neorealism'.<sup>3</sup> Working from Bazin's contention that, during this stage of his career, Fellini's focus on the 'phenomenological description of characters' saw him go further with the neorealist aesthetic than any other director, Brown did not read Cabiria's acknowledgement of the camera simply as a self-conscious act, shattering the fourth wall and removing the character from the material conditions of her diegetic existence. Rather, it was read as a device that brings the viewer closer to Cabiria's experience than ever at the very moment in which she recognizes her entrapment within the chain of events that have befallen her.<sup>4</sup>

The final paper of the day, presented by Stuart Henderson (University of Warwick), suggested that locating closure in an individual film is not always as straightforward as it may seem. As he argued, whilst many franchise films display a desire to leave narrative paths open for future sequels and thus explicitly duck away from offering total closure, our acceptance of any closure that they do provide is always coloured by our extratextual knowledge of the films that precede it. Narrative patterns and character psychologies that we recall from the preceding films can provide us with reason to believe, or doubt, that the overall story has truly come to an end. Challenging Kristin Thompson's assertion that contemporary tendencies towards sequels and seriality reflect a 'loosening of the notion of closure and the self-contained work of fictional art', Henderson argued that closure in the Hollywood film had always involved looking beyond the individual film text.<sup>5</sup> Similar strategies of serialization have functioned in earlier periods of Hollywood history and our understanding of any film's conclusion, whether it is part of a franchise or not, will always be influenced by extratextual factors, our knowledge of generic conventions functioning as a case in point.

6 V. F. Perkins, *Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1993), pp. 134–5.

In his earlier keynote address on the rhetoric of film endings, Michael Walker's close textual analyses of a selection of ending sequences taken from Steven Spielberg films illustrated one such way in which extratextual knowledge affects our experience of any particular film ending. As we witness the self-conscious use in Spielberg's film endings of particular tropes that are repeatedly employed across the closing sequences of the director's various films, we recognize these endings *as* endings and, more specifically, as 'Spielberg endings'. More widely, Walker's analysis allowed him to explicate the separate functions of the two components that typically make up Hollywood film endings: the resolution and the epilogue. Whilst the resolution works to wrap up the narrative, the ensuing epilogue, perhaps accompanied by the familiar helicopter shot, pan out, or setting sun, is used not only, as Victor Perkins has suggested, to rouse its audience from the cinematic illusion, but also to encourage both contemplation and a sense of fulfillment.<sup>6</sup>

Whilst the topics considered on each panel were intentionally divergent, this did not prevent the emergence of certain commonalities, particularly in regard to methodology. Called upon to introduce Victor Perkins (University of Warwick), the first keynote speaker of the day, Douglas Pye (University of Reading) simply quipped that while there might be contexts in which Perkins required some introduction, this conference was certainly not one of them. Not only was the conference being held in his own department at Warwick University, but a sizeable proportion of both the speakers and non-speaking delegates possessed strong connections either to the Warwick film department or to *MOVIE*, the journal of which Perkins and the conference's other keynote speaker, Michael Walker, were editorial board members. Given the reputation held by both Warwick and *MOVIE* for a strong commitment to an approach founded upon the close observation of film texts themselves, it was perhaps unsurprising that detailed textual analysis was employed so consistently and fruitfully across the conference's many panels.

It was also no surprise either that Perkins's keynote paper exemplified this approach. He began the morning session by examining what he termed 'multi-storey movies' – films that separately and consecutively dramatize a string of stories written by the same, celebrated author. Close readings were offered here of the differing ways in which such films choose to frame their collections of stories, often through representation of either the author himself or the book that constitutes the stories' original source. Central to Perkins's approach was his delineation of the range of difficulties that filmmakers face in translating a series of preexisting narratives into a cohesive, feature-length text, each of these narratives coming already packaged with their own preassigned, and not always complementary, beginnings and endings. In doing so, he implicitly reiterated the importance of opening and closing sequences to the creation of coherent, satisfying and balanced works.

The event as a whole spoke of the need for our methodologies to find a balance between, on the one hand, the man-made, and thus elastic and

often virtual status of beginnings and endings, and, on the other, their fundamental importance to our understanding. Whilst it remained clear that the history of film or television should never be read simply in terms of a series of distinct periods, the conference made it equally evident that, as time passes, our object of study is subject to a number of complex modifications. Emergent technologies, changing viewing environments and aesthetic modes stemming from other forms of media all exert some influence on both the production and consumption of audiovisual texts. As a result, our individual critical and theoretical practices must remain equally flexible. This is particularly the case with critical readings of film and television texts. Our interpretations need conclusions but, at the same time, there is a danger that in articulating those conclusions too explicitly through a unitary model, they can be left closed to the possibility of renewal. Finally, whilst opening and closing sequences play demonstrably crucial roles in the projects of individual texts, their functions are only comprehensible in the context of the texts' central corpuses: there can be no beginning and no end without a middle. Furthermore, the conference revealed a clear need for continued research into the ways in which our experiences of filmic introductions and conclusions are affected by elements that lie beyond these textual boundaries. Extratextual knowledge garnered from prequels and other genre films plays a key role here, but other contexts such as promotional materials also need to be considered.

While no radical shifts were in evidence in any the individual subject fields explored over the day's various sessions, the importance of the notion of beginnings and endings to film studies was consistently and productively tested, modified and ultimately reaffirmed.

**Ranjani Mazumdar, *Bombay Cinema: an Archive of the City*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007, 257 pp.**

**ROSIE THOMAS**

Over the past decade and a half, the Indian city has changed beyond recognition. Today's increasingly divided Bombay is simultaneously a city of decline, since the brutal closures of its textile mills, and one of exponentially increasing wealth and consumer display, following the economic liberalization of the early 1990s and subsequent globalization. Glitzy shopping malls now mushroom where mills once stood, in the midst of their impoverished, former communities. Over the same period, Bombay cinema has seen the emergence of lavish big-budget family films, sexually assertive heroines and dark gangster movies.

*Bombay Cinema: an Archive of the City* is an imaginative and welcome exploration of modernity in the Indian context, and of the relationship between the Indian city and its cinema. Mazumdar's project examines the relevance of recent Euro-American cultural theory to the South Asian context. Fascinating questions arise: what is the equivalent of the *flâneur* in a city in which – until recently – there have been few, if any, shop window displays or arcades, and in which leisurely strolling has been scarcely feasible? What might it mean to talk of 'shocks' and 'hyperstimulus' in the context of the vibrant, noisy *bazaars* (streets) of the modern South Asian city? What relevance do theories of modernity have to cities with decidedly fuzzy lines between urban and rural, where hundreds of thousands sleep on the 'footpaths' or roadside pavements, creating 'mimic villages' or quasi-rural communities within that urban space?

Mazumdar's intriguing proposition is that 'it is through the fleeting yet memorable forms of urban life in popular Bombay cinema that the texture of modernity in India can be understood' (p. xxxiv). These forms

- 1 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

of urban life range from the spaces and places – both literal and fantastical – through which Bombay is represented within cinema, to the character types that erupt from and play out the urban experience on film. Operating ‘like an archaeologist’, she proposes to ‘excavate’ Bombay cinema as a ‘hidden archive of the modern’.

At the heart of the book lies Walter Benjamin’s opposition between the city of phantasmagoria and the city of ruin, the two sides of capitalist modernity, wherein the glitter of the aestheticized commodity contrasts with its dark shadow in the underbelly of the capitalist dream, the nightmare space of production, exploitation, catastrophe.<sup>1</sup> Mazumdar draws on these notions – and more – to offer a stimulating and provocative ‘allegorical’ reading of Bombay cinema since the 1990s, suggesting that ‘cinema emerged as the phantasmagoria of Indian modernity’, and that it is primarily through cinema that Indian audiences have been introduced to the aestheticized lure of the commodity (p. 95).

On the one hand, she points to the spate of increasingly opulent and successful big-budget ‘family films’ such as Yash Chopra’s *Dil to Pagal Hai* (1997) or Karan Johar’s *Kabhie Khushi, Kabhie Gham* (2001), made with a keen eye to the diasporic market. In these films, rich families live international lifestyles in splendid isolation from the chaos and squalor of the *bazaar*, constructing themselves as simultaneously part of global culture but – by virtue of the families’ ostentatiously ‘traditional’ (and invariably Hindu) rituals and values – also firmly ‘Indian’. But where most discussion to date has privileged the narrative logic of such films, Mazumdar’s refreshing analysis focuses instead on the panoramic interior spaces within which these characters play out their lives, and the cinematic strategies through which these extraordinary, hyperreal, designer settings are created. She notes that whilst modernist architecture in the West emphasizes continuity with the outside to increase a sense of space – as in the ‘picture window’ looking out onto a ‘view’ – in the dream home of the South Asian city the outside is firmly blocked out. These lavish cinematic interiors – which can devour up to a third of the films’ budgets – ‘have emerged as the space of the “virtual city”, where the Bombay of claustrophobia is made to physically disappear’ (p. 117), a symptom, Mazumdar suggests, of the fear and anxiety of the postmodern condition.

On the other hand, the city of ruin – the spaces on the margins of this spectacular, phantasmagoric, consumerist utopia – has become visualized, she suggests, through a new breed of gangster film by directors such as Ram Gopal Varma: *Satya* (1998) and *Company* (2002). These films are set in a mythologized underworld that draws on rumour and hearsay to provide a counter-narrative to the story of Bombay’s increasing success and globalized affluence. This underworld ‘resides in the city both as fact and as fiction’ (p. 196); in a curious exchange, gangsters have now learned to walk and talk like their cinematic alter egos. Citing Blom Hansen,<sup>2</sup> Mazumdar points to the reality of central Bombay in the immediate post-textile mill era as an example of the

- 2 Thomas Blom Hansen, *Wages of Violence: Naming and Identity in Postcolonial Bombay* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

'residual city', which has become reframed through cinema as 'a city marked by violence, terror, claustrophobia, and the uncanny' (p. 151). The gangster cinema reminds us that 'the glitter of consumption comes at a price' (p. 195). Where the family films are shot on sets that emphasize bright lights, the glamour of designer fashion and dramatic architecture, the gangster films, shot on location, unfold within morbid, shadowy darkness or the shabbiness of the everyday. Some, like *Parinda* (Vidhu Vinod Chopra, 1989), deploy cinematic strategies of film noir and fragmented montage editing, others, like *Satya*, reference the codes of documentary realism, or what Mazumdar calls 'the aesthetics of garbage' (p. 173). Where the 'good life' of a global world intrudes, as in *Company*, the film offers a detached aerial gaze and self-reflexive language to construct the fluid, virtual spaces of postmodernity. Unlike the family films, in the gangster genre interior spaces open directly onto the frenetic activity of the street, with no clear demarcation between outside and inside, and family relations are replaced by 'brotherhood' within the hierarchical gang, from which the only escape is death.

The glitter and lure of consumption can also, Mazumdar proposes, explain the ways in which female roles have changed in recent years, noting that the westernized vamp gyrating in her seedy nightclub has been replaced by the sexually aggressive heroine. In a particularly thought-provoking part of the argument, Mazumdar suggests that in India, where the city was not (until very recently) the space of seductive shop-windows and *flânerie*, cinema offered a novel form of virtual *flânerie*. With the Indian *bazaar* a chaotic marketplace, it was cinema, rather than department stores, arcades and shop-windows, that introduced audiences to 'the aestheticised world of the commodity' and 'became the window for (virtual) global travel' (p. 95). In the post-liberalization era since 1992, film songs, as spaces of reverie, have offered a virtual window-shopping fashion experience, particularly for the female spectator, she argues, whilst films themselves have become increasingly fragmented.

Against this, Bombay cinema has spawned a number of models for how a disaffected underclass might live out urban modernity: anger, psychosis, fear or playful defiance. Mazumdar describes a range of proletarian male character types to have emerged as antiheroes in recent years, from Amitabh Bachchan's 1970s 'angry man' (*Deewaar* [Yash Chopra, 1975]), to Shahrukh Khan's psychotic hero (*Baazigar* [Abbas Mastan, 1993]) or Aamir Khan's comic, rebellious *tapori*/loafer character (*Rangeela* [Ram Gopal Varma, 1995]). Drawing on the trope of homelessness, these are all figures of 'the footpath', the mythic space of the city of the margins. Whilst in Bombay films of the 1950s this was the place of an idealized nation, imbued with pathos and moral integrity (as in the films of Raj Kapoor), in the 1970s it became the space from which the crisis of postcolonial nationalism – and its failed development agenda – could be angrily challenged by the populist antihero, using violence to fight for the community of the dispossessed, as exemplified

by Amitabh Bachchan's persona. Revenge was morally justified but ultimately doomed. By the 1990s, Mazumdar suggests, two other strategies of resistance had emerged. On the one hand, disillusion turned to paranoid urban nightmare, so that in *Baazigar* the antihero became a psychotic, self-destructive force, fighting only for himself, with little need for his violence to be explained or redeemed. On the other hand, the transgressive *tapori* figure – Aamir Khan's 'loafer with attitude' – used humorous insolence to challenge the lifestyle myths of global consumerism, with a hybrid performance style that celebrated the Bombay street dialect, *Bambayya*, and a repertoire of looks and gestures drawing on sources as diverse as 1950s Hollywood rebels, Marlon Brando and James Dean, contemporary Afro-American youth culture, and Amitabh Bachchan's early comedy roles (notably *Amar Akbar Anthony* [Manmohan Desai, 1977]).

Mazumdar's argument is rich and complex, and summary cannot do justice to the insights she brings to her analyses. The range of films on which her argument is based is necessarily constrained, and she stresses that these are not to be seen as typical, or even representative, of the vast body of films made in Bombay each year. Moreover her readings are deliberately partial and symptomatic – she mostly privileges visual analysis of mise-en-scene and episodic fragments over narrative or textual analysis. Whilst this may blind us to some deeper connections, it undoubtedly allows for provocative and unexpected links to emerge between films and cultural theory, often effectively using Bombay cinema to test the applicability and limits of this cultural theory, which she navigates skilfully.

Inevitably, with such an ambitious project, there is room for more. Whilst the book deals in engaging and sophisticated ways with cinema's social and political undercurrents, and also points to some incursions of global cinema and culture, it underplays the role of Bombay cinema's own history in producing these recent films. Firstly, for readers who do not know Bombay cinema well, some of the author's assertions may be a little misleading: for example, the vamp *did* exist well before the 1960s and was a familiar character of 1920s and 1930s cinema. Moreover, in song picturizations heroines have been routinely skipping continents and changing saris between shots since at least the 1960s – what has changed is the *way* in which this happens nowadays and the designer-dominated consumer ethos which feeds most recent films. What perhaps needs clearer signposting, especially for readers less familiar with Indian cinema and its history, is how far the author is suggesting continuity with earlier forms and how far a radical break. Most crucially, is she arguing that Bombay cinema has always offered a form of virtual *flânerie*, as a way of engaging with modernity – in different ways in different eras? Or is her argument that this has emerged primarily with globalization, and that recent films mark something of a radical break?

This uncertainty arises because the intertextuality of Bombay cinema as a reservoir of images and tropes – indeed as an archive – is unevenly

developed here. Thus, whilst *Deewaar* – about which much has already been written elsewhere – is presented as something of an ur-text for many contemporary filmmakers, and forms the starting point of Mazumdar's argument, there is still more to be said. Importantly, as Bombay cinema aficionados know well, *Deewaar* drew openly on two earlier classics, *Mother India* (Mehboob Khan, 1957) and *Ganga Jamuna* (Nitin Bose, 1961), both of which explored rebellious masculinity along with many other films of that era. On the other hand, *Deewaar* itself can be seen as harbouring the seeds of many more of the post-1990s developments than Mazumdar acknowledges: the split between phantasmagoria and ruin – consumerist excess and noiresque criminality – is already there in embryo, as is the westernized sexually assertive heroine, Parveen Babi. In focusing on filmic fragments and a handful of films, it is easy to lose sight of the cinema as a dynamic and evolving archive, with its myriad interconnections and its own internal, intertextual logic. But such historical framing is part of a larger project – one in which Mazumdar is now herself engaged.

*Bombay Cinema* is an exciting and important contribution to a field that has, to date, been under-researched and under-theorized. Lively, provocative and richly suggestive, it will also serve as a surefire incentive to watch those films all over again.

**Scott Higgins, *Harnessing the Technicolor Rainbow: Color Design in the 1930s*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2007, 292 pp.**

**STEVE NEALE**

The blurb on the back of this book claims that *'Harnessing the Technicolor Rainbow* is the first scholarly history of Technicolor aesthetics and technology, as well as a thoroughgoing analysis of how color works in film. Scott Higgins draws on extensive primary research and close analysis of well-known movies . . . to show how the Technicolor films of the 1930s forged enduring conventions for handling color in popular cinema.' It also claims that Higgins 'formulates a new vocabulary and method of analysis for capturing the often elusive functions and effects of color that, in turn, open up new avenues for the study of film form and lay a foundation for new work on color in cinema'. These claims are well founded. Indeed, if anything, they understate rather than overstate Higgins's achievements.

Although by no means the first scholarly history of Technicolor technology, and although dealing almost exclusively with the use made of three-colour Technicolor in 'liveaction' films (mention is made of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* [1937] and Disney's cartoon shorts, but little detailed attention is paid to them), *Harnessing the Technicolor Rainbow* does indeed formulate 'a new vocabulary and a method of analysis' for capturing the effects and the functions of colour. It also provides a convincing account of the ways in which three-colour Technicolor was deployed in three distinct and successive 'modes' in the 1930s: a 'demonstrative mode' exemplified by *La Cucaracha* (Lloyd Corrigan, 1934) and *Becky Sharp* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1935); a 'restrained mode' exemplified by *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine* (Henry Hathaway, 1936), *A Star is Born* (William A. Wellman, 1937) and *The Goldwyn Follies* (George Marshall, 1938); and an 'assertive mode'

exemplified by *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (Michael Curtiz and William Keighley, 1938). In 1939, Technicolor introduced a new and more sensitive film stock. First used in the production of *Little Princess* (Walter Lang, 1939), it was subsequently showcased in *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939). Enabling ‘a higher cooperation between color and the tonal elements of light and shadow’ (p. 20), Higgins shows in detail how the new stock was used in *GWTW* to ‘close the distance between monochrome and Technicolor style’ while manipulating its properties to extend the ‘expressive reach’ of colour itself (p. 21).

In order to analyze these uses, modes and properties, Higgins distinguishes between hue, chroma (saturation) and value. Hue refers to a colour’s characteristic wavelength as designed by common colour terms such as red, blue and yellow; chroma to a colour’s intensity; value to its lightness or darkness. These distinctions are relatively conventional. Less conventional is the vocabulary Higgins uses to label colours themselves. Here he draws on the terms used in *The Pantone Book of Color*. These terms were initially devised to specify gradations of printer’s ink and were later used in the fashion industry and in the fields of set and interior design. There are 1024 in all, ranging from Air Blue to Pink Mist to Yolk Yellow. Although, as Higgins himself notes, ‘the gamut of colors in a Technicolor film would certainly overwhelm the list of Pantone standards’, the Pantone system ‘increases our descriptive vocabulary’, ‘enables distinctions to be made between relatively similar colors’, and ‘provides a way to compare colors as they appear across a film’ (p. 14). Its value is evident throughout the book. Higgins notes that at one point in *Robin Hood*, ‘the camera tracks past a series of color accents. . . . Then color picks up as the camera passes by an old woman with a Melon orange vest and Shell Pink cowl. In the background, a woman with bright Porcelain Blue accents on her skirt draws attention while, in the foreground, the camera discovers a man in a Hot Coral red hat’ (p. 140). Along with scenes of pageantry and action, it is in relatively unspectacular ways such as this, he goes on to argue, that ‘*Robin Hood* prods the spectator to recognize color’ (p. 140). The Pantone terms help Higgins to be precise. But he is happy to use everyday ones too, as when drawing attention to ‘the red and yellow gelatin’ and the ‘red chilli peppers’ in the banquet and forest feast scenes in order to make the point that they function as ‘vehicles of chroma’ and in this way contribute to *Robin Hood*’s assertive strategies (p. 141).

Assertiveness of a different kind marks *La Cucaracha* and *Becky Sharp*. As early examples of three-colour Technicolor, and in parallel with the ways technologies such as sound, large-screen and widescreen have been introduced, these films flaunt colour and its possibilities in more overt and schematic ways. Like most later Technicolor films, and in keeping with the recommendations of Natalie Kalmus, head of Technicolor’s Color Advisory Service, *La Cucaracha* and *Becky Sharp* favour designs that ‘centred maximum color contrast on the key narrative elements of a scene’ (p. 16). They also employ colour palettes ‘that

consistently emphasized bold contrasts of hue' (p. 16). They are marked by the repeated use of specific devices (mood lighting in *La Cucaracha*, colour dissolves in *Becky Sharp*). But they rarely encourage 'the development of palettes across a film, the formation of complex color motifs, or the exploration of different levels of cooperation between color and other elements of style' (p. 73). These were the product of the restrained mode. But the demonstrative mode did introduce techniques that were much more long-lasting: 'The keying of color to the lead female performer, the exploitation of transitional sequences for color foregrounding, the guiding of attention into depth through the placement of accents, the use of momentary color contrasts to punctuate a dramatic development, and the attempt to incorporate low-key and other monochrome lighting effects' (p. 74).

Aiming to make Technicolor's 'production practices, and color itself, approach the standards of black-and-white filmmaking', the restrained mode 'reduced hue contrast in favor of an emphasis on tone and value' (p. 20). In one of the most interesting sections of the book, Higgins shows in detail how this emphasis works in practice and how the muted use of colour in the films he discusses gives rise to a number of extraordinarily subtle effects and motifs. He argues that the development of the restrained mode assisted Technicolor in developing a market with the major studios (*La Cucaracha* and *Becky Sharp* were both produced by Pioneer Productions, the latter in concert with RKO). However, while this was clearly true by 1938–39, it is worth underlining the fact that *A Star is Born* and *GWTW*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, and *The Goldwyn Follies* were all produced by major independents (Selznick International, Disney and Goldwyn).

In analyzing these modes and the films that exemplify them, Higgins is careful to draw attention to the roles played by advisors, designers, cinematographers and other personnel. He is also careful to measure the statements and recollections of advisors and practitioners against the evidence provided in and by the films themselves. Here, too, Higgins has been scrupulous. Aware of the sometimes substantial chromatic differences between 35 mm nitrate dye-transfer prints, 35 mm dye-transfer prints on safety stock, photochemical reproductions of Technicolor films, reissues, 16 mm copies and, of course, copies on video and DVD, he documents the prints he has worked on and the conditions in which they viewed. He also discusses the chromatic characteristics of the major reissues of *GWTW*, thus helping to make the point that historically sensitive studies of colour are by no means straightforward. He concludes his book with a chapter that looks briefly at the 1940s, the advent of digital colour, and the opportunities for research on these and on other topics. In these as in many other ways, he has produced an exemplary book.

**Melvyn Stokes, *D.W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation: a History of 'The Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time'*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 413 pp.**

**ANNE MOREY**

What more can one say about *The Birth of a Nation*? Melvyn Stokes's *D.W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation: a History of 'The Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time'* labours heroically, and successfully, in the face of a crowded scholarly field. In his meticulously and comprehensively researched account, Stokes seems to have unearthed and sifted virtually anything one might want to know about this film. While the book is ultimately more interested in context than in text, the detail and range of contexts offered here for understanding this film are dazzling.

Stokes offers an unusual amount of detail about major figures behind the film usually mentioned only in passing, particularly Thomas Dixon, the protean lawyer, preacher, dramatist, novelist and filmmaker whose two plays, *The Leopard's Spots* and *The Klansman*, supplied the armature for the screenplay and who here receives a chapter to himself that offers a remarkably full treatment of his literary output. In many respects, however, the chapters most likely to impress readers who think that they already command the cultural matrix behind the manufacture and consumption of this film are those (such as 'Griffith's view of history' and the unfortunately named 'After *Birth*') that assemble a variety of reception contexts. For example, Stokes presents the 1912 and 1913 Mann Act prosecutions of Jack Johnson, the then reigning black heavyweight boxer charged with transporting white women across state lines for immoral purposes, as an important frame of reference for white viewers of *Birth* two years later. As Stokes notes, given the strictures of the Sims Act, which prevented the transport of fight films across state

lines in deference to white sensibilities wounded by fight films depicting Johnson vanquishing all white comers, 'the only white man fighting African Americans with his fists to be depicted in a major film in 1915 was the blacksmith in *The Birth of a Nation*' (p. 220), suggesting why, among other reasons, this role should have proved a springboard to stardom for Wallace Reid. Stokes fascinatingly also suggests a temperance context for *Birth* that appears not to have been previously emphasized by scholars, a phenomenon that united Griffith's rather pathological devotion to his heavy-drinking father Roaring Jake with an important 'justification' for racist attitudes in as much as drink was viewed at the time as the great accelerant for black bestiality (p. 218).

Stokes's narrative of NAACP opposition to the film at first appears to be a familiar story; yet it is told in such a way, and with such a useful freight of additional detail, that it emerges as genuinely revelatory. Stokes works his way sensitively through the political, ideological and social faultlines not only between the NAACP and the National Board of Review, and later the ACLU, but also among individual mayors and governors in a stunningly wide array of American communities. While the NAACP protests were initially unsuccessful, causing the organization eventually to conclude that its attempts to use the courts and censorship legislation to shut down the film probably helped *Birth* more than they hindered it, Stokes's analysis extends beyond the usual terminus of this story in the film's initial release period to embrace the very different political climate that obtained once the United States entered World War I, when national unity dictated that blacks contributing to the war effort not be reviled through showings of this film.

Throughout the book, Stokes pulls no punches on the question of responsibility for the film's racist attitudes (Dixon and Griffith were neither casual nor unthinking racists), going out of his way to differentiate between what one might call an ambient racism and the more self-conscious kind on display in this film. Similarly, Stokes carefully distinguishes between the 'old' Klan of the nineteenth century and the 'new', post-*Birth* Klan of the 1910s and 1920s in an analysis of the film's social functions in its first two decades of circulation. *Birth* proved to be a fabulous recruiting tool for the new Klan, but the Klan's vulgarity and thuggishness undermined the film's acceptability in other circles as early as the 1920s, a process accelerated by the widening of Klan targets to include Jews and Catholics, which gave NAACP protests the traction they previously lacked.

Stokes's account of the afterlife of the film is among the triumphs of his research and presentation, and his conclusion rightly identifies the 'aesthetic marvel v. racist calumny' binary as one of the most troubling consequences of attempting to discuss a brilliantly achieved canonical film that is also (and foremost) a vile racist caricature. Stokes argues that form is not here separable from content, which may indeed be the case, but the 'endangered white womanhood' trope is surprisingly detachable

from *Birth*'s narrative in some ways. Not only does it precede *Birth* in Griffith films such as *The Battle of Elderbrush Gulch* (1913), where admittedly the attackers are, again, not white (they are Native Americans), but it also recurs, as Stokes notes, in *Hearts of the World* (1918), where the rapist is an impeccably Aryan German spy (who nonetheless may be in the context of war propaganda 'not white'). The discussion of the relationship between form and content consequently needs to be more sustained, suggesting the need to return to a closer consideration of the text.

One of the few respects in which the book frustrates is its organization, in which thematic and chronological modes of presentation appear occasionally to be at war. Switching between organizational modes causes a certain amount of repetition – it is obviously impossible to keep all of the Dixon information in the Dixon silo, and we encounter some crucial facts (such as Dixon's having been Woodrow Wilson's classmate at Johns Hopkins) more than once. Similarly, material on black spectatorship presented in 'Griffith's view of history' relates more closely to the chapter entitled 'Fighting a vicious film' than it does to Griffith's understanding of history *per se*. Occasional glitches in organization notwithstanding, however, Stokes offers an extremely valuable account of *Birth* that is both major synthesis and original analysis.

**Phil Powrie, Bruce Babington, Ann Davies and Chris Perriam, *Carmen on Film: a Cultural History*. Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007, 303 pp.**

**PAUL JULIAN SMITH**

This excellent collected volume, authored by four scholars well known in their specialist areas and all originally from the University of Newcastle, is the first book dedicated to the corpus of Carmen films from the silent period to the present day and in the three national areas of the USA, France and Spain. Funded by an Arts and Humanities Research Council grant for the period 1999–2002, this major project has already produced an annotated filmography and bibliography on the same topic by two of the authors.<sup>1</sup>

After an introduction which stresses the central point of ‘the repeated murder and resurrection of Carmen’ (p. ix), the book continues with two further introductory chapters. ‘Mapping Carmen’ offers a historical overview of the texts, while ‘Theorizing Carmen’ suggests a conceptual framework for their analysis. The main body of the study is then divided into four parts. Three focus on distinct national cinemas and offer close readings of individual films selected for their particular significance. While some titles are well known, others (especially the earliest and the most recent) have received little or no critical attention. The fourth part, risking repetition, focuses rather on the stars of some of these same films (again, American, French and Spanish), including one male (the impassive Plácido Domingo from Rosi’s 1984 version of the opera).

In ‘Carmen of the Americas’ (the longest section) Bruce Babington offers fascinating readings of two silent *Carmens* (Cecil B. DeMille and Raoul Walsh, both 1915), of versions by Ernst Lubitsch (1918 and 1921), Walsh (1927) and King Vidor (1948), and of Otto Preminger’s *Carmen Jones* (1954). The ‘national’ category is admirably flexible here,

<sup>1</sup> Ann Davies and Phil Powrie, *Carmen on Screen* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2006).

embracing as it does both German–American relations in the person of Lubitsch and the distinctively African-American culture that, it is argued here, is preserved by Preminger. This flexibility is even clearer in Phil Powrie’s French section, which leaps from two silent *Carmens* once more (André Calmettes, 1910; Jacques Feyder, 1926) to Jean-Luc Godard and Francesco Rosi (both 1984), and the ‘postcolonial’ *Karmen Gei* made in Senegal (Joseph Gaï Ramaka, 2001). Chris Perriam and Ann Davies’s Spanish section is divided more simply into two historical periods, each represented by two films: ‘Carmen under Franco’ (Floriàn Rey, 1938; Tulio Demicheli, 1959) and ‘Carmen after Franco’ (Carlos Saura, 1983; Vicente Aranda, 2003). The stars studied in the final part, for which all four contributors take credit, are the ambiguously Latina Rita Hayworth, the typically Parisian vamp Viviane Romance, the perennially camp Sara Montiel, and Plácido Domingo, who brings both high-culture kudos and stubbornly stagy stolidity to the film.

As the authors acknowledge in their introduction, this is a huge and complex corpus: only Dracula has inspired more film versions of a classic tale (p. x). And the nature of the Carmen narrative is that it engages many different tensions: between the high culture of opera and the low culture of a cinema that attempted, nonetheless, to attract a bourgeois audience; between the active *femme fatale* and the often passive masculinity of Carmen’s lover and murderer Don José; and between the exoticized Other of gypsies and Andalusians and the assumed national communities that Carmen calls into question even within Spain itself. Problems of cultural distinction, gender and ethnicity are rendered yet more complex by Carmen’s dual and duelling inheritance as text (Prosper Mérimée) and music (Georges Bizet).

The first of the book’s many virtues is thus the significant archival labour involved in establishing a corpus of over eighty films. Indeed, even non-extant films are considered here, as when Walsh’s intriguing Theda Bara vehicle is suggestively examined on the basis of publicity, reviews, production stills and the director’s own synopsis (a kiss-curled Bara smoulders on the book’s cover). In the case of several of these early versions, the use of film magazines, addressed to both the sober trade constituency and the movie-mad public, is crucial and exemplary.

This historical focus on production history and national reception leads to some surprising and enriching parallels. Thus both French and Spanish actresses (Romance and Imperio Argentina) made trips to Nazi Germany and had later to be absolved from claims of collaboration. Censorship under the Hays Code or Franco’s dictatorship is juxtaposed with *Karmen Gei*’s more recent fate at the hands of Islamist radicals, when this uniquely lesbianized version was banned from Senegal’s screens after just six weeks (p. 144). Rita Hayworth’s ‘extraordinary’ gowns and sexy shoes, ‘suited to commercial tie-ins’ in postwar America (Vidor, 1948; p. 85), contrast with Raquel Meller’s ‘close fitting and heavy costumes’ (Feyder, 1926; p. 119), which are incongruous in flapper-era France and emphatically deny the sexual availability that

Hayworth flaunts so knowingly. Actresses from Bara and Meller to Romance and Montiel are obliged to sport the unbecoming kiss curl (*caracol*), ambiguously associated with both vertiginous lust and Medusa-like castration (p. 118). The excellent illustrations reveal that Hayworth and Dolores del Río were spared the indignities of this hairstyle.

The telling attention to *mise-en-scène* in a sociohistorical context (in which skirt length, say, can be crucial to the political implications of a film) is matched by some unusually close readings in which shot-by-shot analysis offers unexpected and rewarding insights. Thus it is not surprising that Calmette in 1910 should use a theatrical setup ‘open[ing] onto an imagined proscenium’ even in exteriors (p. 110). But it is significant that there is ‘strict segregation of entries and exits’ in relation to the frame, with soldiers keeping to the left and smugglers to the right (the nomadic Carmen, typically, fails to observe this division of space) (p. 111). The star entrance of Montiel is exceptionally ritualized: ‘[she] is positioned exactly one-third of the way into the screen from right or (less usually) left; she is in three-quarter profile, head tilted slightly upward the more to dynamize the lips and tongue’ (p. 220). Chris Perriam allows himself (and his readers) some humour here, amidst the thick description of costume and performance style: as an unlikely peasant girl, the regal Montiel bathes in a stream, thus ‘denot[ing] her innocence while wetting her blouse’ (p. 222).

Although the specific vocabularies of dance and music are ably employed throughout, it is a shame that the theoretical paradigms sketched in the introductory material (especially Deleuze on the ‘refrain’) are exploited so little in the body of the work that follows. But *Carmen on Film* remains an impeccable scholarly guide to a fascinating figure that, as the authors acknowledge more than once, remains eternally elusive even as she is so repeatedly resurrected.

**Alan Grossman and Áine O'Brien (eds), *Projecting Migration: Transcultural Documentary Practice*. London: Wallflower Press, 2007, 240 pp.**

**PHILIPPA LOVATT**

'Whose history matters?' asks Glenn Jordan in his essay, 'Presenting themselves before the camera: the Somali Elders Project in Cardiff'. This question reverberates throughout Alan Grossman and Áine O'Brien's edited collection, *Projecting Migration: Transcultural Documentary Practice*, recently published by Wallflower Press as part of their new 'Nonfictions' series. Responding to the recent growth in the field of migration studies, this collaborative project of interdisciplinary practice-driven research attempts to 'critically reframe' the ways in which the diverse experiences of migrancy can be represented and understood.

The most engaging (and rewarding) essays in this anthology are those in which the authors/practitioners examine and analyze the research and production contexts of their work, offering at times highly personal reflections on their own subjective positions in relation to it. In this respect, Roberta McGrath's 'History read backward: memory, migration and the photographic archive', Anthony Haughey's 'Imagining the unimaginable: *Disputed Territory*', Jayce Salloum's '*Sans titre/untitled*: video installation as an active archive' and Roshini Kempadoo's '*Back Routes*: historical articulation in multimedia production' speak to each other most closely.

The first of these to appear in the collection is McGrath's essay, which describes how her work uses montage to 'bring into dialogue' (p. 37) photographic images and written texts documenting migration in and out of Scotland between 1841 and 1949 with contemporary discourses on migration, attempting to raise questions about the 'nature of vision and historical memory in relation to present understandings of migration' (p. 37). Recognizing the fragmentary quality of the archive – as much

formed by that which has been forgotten as that which is remembered – McGrath asserts that as an ‘embodied’ research practice ‘archival excavation’ can destabilize dominant nationalist historical narratives by reawakening ‘long subdued’ counter-memories through the sense of touch, sight and smell, enabling what she calls the ‘democratisation of social memory’ (p. 43).

Crucially, for McGrath, this is about ‘the kind of pasts we want to bring into the present and, therefore, about the different futures we might imagine’ (p. 43). This sentiment is shared by Anthony Haughey in his discussion of his multimedia project, *Disputed Territory*, which documents post-conflict landscapes in Europe. Echoing McGrath’s symbiotic relationship with the image, Haughey states that close observation of the landscape can reveal ‘signs’ which ‘gesture’ towards underlying questions relating to history and memory, and which resonate with reminders of past struggles. Like McGrath, Haughey sees his work as being ‘interventional’ – seeking to generate ‘re-interpretation’ and to undermine predominant media representations of conflict, envisaging his methodology as way of ‘re-framing’ collective memory/history’ (p. 58).

Jayce Salloum’s essay also critiques dominant historiographies reliant upon the ‘essentialising gaze’ (p. 176) of ethnographic enquiry and traditional (authoritative) realist forms of documentary representation. Like McGrath and Haughey, Salloum through his video installation, *sans titre/untitled*, is interested in creating a politicized space in which silenced and negated voices may emerge. Similarly recalling Stuart Hall’s ‘living archive’, Salloum adopts an ‘intersubjective’ approach stressing the importance of a dialogic relationship between the archived material and the viewer, through which she/he must assume responsibility for ‘visualising and re-constructing their own cultural/political perceptions’ (p. 166). For these three writers, the viewer becomes *a part* of the archive, sharing and thus preserving stories that would otherwise disappear. Thus, Salloum argues, the work can be seen to function as a form of resistance affecting social, political and personal change.

Roshini Kempadoo demonstrates a parallel scepticism towards ‘objective’ representations in *Back Routes: historical articulation in multimedia production*. ‘Inhabiting an ambivalent space, somewhere between fictional and factual discourses’ (p. 208), her multimedia project *Back Routes* is concerned with the black Caribbean colonial subject and her own relationship as a practitioner to the colonial narratives of the transatlantic trade routes. Echoing Salloum, she sees documentary realism as embodying ‘the gaze of imperial visual structures’ (p. 203), and so adopts a nonrealist aesthetic that is deliberately layered and multiple in order to contest linear hegemonic methods of representation and to critique colonial historiography, opening up a space for ‘absent narratives’ (p. 208).

While Kempadoo clearly has much in common with the ethical and political commitment of the contributors discussed thus far, interestingly,

what distinguishes Kempadoo's work from much of the rest of the projects described in *Projecting Migration*, is the notable absence of representations of the material body of the 'subject', as she refuses to subscribe to what she considers the objectifying (and thus reductive) patterns of representation associated with the 'anthropological view of culture' (p. 205). It is at this point that a rather awkward ideological tension reveals itself.

In contrast with Kempadoo, Lawrence Taylor's 'Picturing the tunnel kids' and Jordan's 'Presenting themselves before the camera' focus very much on representation, both using a combination of 'humanistic' portrait photography, collaborative ethnography and oral history to portray the 'interstitiality' of migrant identity and challenge stereotypes. Taylor's essay focuses on the documentation of the everyday lives of Mexican migrant street children, in and around the ambiguous space of the underground tunnels between Nogales, Mexico and Nogales, Arizona – a liminal zone which they consider to be their 'home territory'. Jordan's essay describes how the Cardiff project sought to 'render visible' (p. 215) the diasporic Somali community living in Wales, to restore their dignity and combat racism.

Representation is also a key aspect of Harry Browne and Chinedu Onyejelem's 'Textualising radio practice: sounding out a changing Ireland', and Alan Grossman and Áine O'Brien's 'Televisualising transnational migration: *The New Americans*', which focus on media representations of immigrants, in Ireland and America respectively. Having to wrangle a place for itself within Ireland's 'monocultural' broadcasting environment in which migrant perspectives are most often marginalized or tokenistically evoked in uncritical (and often patronizing) celebrations of 'multiculturalism', Browne and Onyejelem argue that their combined book and radio project, *Home from Home*, questions dominant nationalist narratives and exposes the discriminatory practices that such narratives support by drawing on oral accounts of migrants' diverse experiences of living in Ireland. In a similar vein, Grossman and O'Brien's essay, which details the production context of the seven-hour documentary miniseries exploring the different experiences of US migrants, *The New Americans* (Kartemquin Films, 2004), draws on oral testimony, bringing together interview material and video clips debating the politics of public television documentary funding, as well as the themes around migrant subjectivity raised in the series.

A third aspect of *Projecting Migration* deals with the use of video in ethnographic fieldwork studying experiences of migrancy; Rossella Ragazzi's 'Migrant children and the performance of memory: film fieldwork', Graeme Rodgers and Andrea Spitz's 'Video messaging in contexts of forced migration: "amplifying" social relatedness across the Mozambique/South Africa border', and David Coplan and Gei Zantzinger's 'Iconology: exploring the DVD in Southern African migrant culture research' all deal with this subject. Of these three essays,

it is Rodgers and Spitz in their account of the impact of the instigation (by the authors) of a (temporary) video message relaying system between Mozambican refugees across the Mozambique/South Africa border that seems to have the most problematic relationship with the ethical concerns of *Projecting Migration* as a whole. This is perhaps due in part to the fact that while some of the filmed messages were to be used as 'data' to be 'anthropologically' analyzed, other parts would be incorporated into a television documentary entitled *Voices Across the Fence* commissioned by eTV, a South African television station. Referring to their own presence as an 'intrusion' inflected with an almost 'colonialist' power dynamic and making explicit their awareness of the limitations of their project, the authors are remarkably self-reflexive. Yet, despite this self-awareness and their undoubtedly benevolent intentions, the authors' stated interest in introducing video to this community 'to provoke their expression in a form that could be accessed, observed and analysed' (p. 20), and their suggestion that they use video to "amplify" disrupted social relations' (p. 20), jar somewhat with the accompanying footage of the at times highly emotive messages on the DVD-ROM. When we see a dying old man's tears of anger, for example, when he witnesses on a small television screen the comparative luxury of his neglectful relatives across the border, as he lies prostrate on the ground, one cannot help feeling that the presence of the camera crew disrupts these relations even further, firstly to provide material for anthropological analysis, and secondly to put together a sufficiently strong narrative for a television audience.

Coplan and Zantzinger's essay, which describes the impact that DVD technology has had on ethnographic fieldwork (using the documentary film, *Songs of Adventurers* directed by Zantzinger in 1986 about the folk performance of Lesotho migrant workers in southern Africa as a case study), has an equally, if not even more, strained relationship with the chapters described earlier and which sits alongside in this collection. Although the video footage which accompanies this chapter on the DVD-ROM is certainly rich and interesting, the expository voiceover of the male 'content expert' 'fixing' the meaning of these sounds and images creates a hierarchical relationship that sits uncomfortably with concerns over the politics of aesthetics articulated by the main body of this collection, which foregrounds an ideological imperative that seeks to move away from such asymmetrical constructions of meaning. Nevertheless, despite, or perhaps because of, these tensions, taken as a whole, *Projecting Migration* is a stimulating and hugely interesting anthology which will undoubtedly make a valuable contribution to the fields of both migration and documentary studies.

**Andrew Spicer (ed.), *European Film Noir*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007, 288 pp.**

**MARTINE BEUGNET**

The most transnational of genres, film noir is nonetheless, as Andrew Spicer points out in his introduction to *European Film Noir*, hailed as a quintessentially American genre. While the French and British traditions of noir cinema have gained some recognition recently (not least through citation by contemporary American filmmakers), there has been little comprehensive study of non-American film noir. This collection goes a long way to fill this gap, and to establish European cinema not merely as a provider of early references to what was to become an American canon, but as the site of diverse film noir traditions in their own right. Bringing together key specialists, this collection provides diachronic studies of French, British, German, Spanish and Italian cinemas.

Ginette Vincendeau offers a typically captivating account of film noir as a French tradition, weaving together an investigation of the historical context with a revealing analysis of key thematic and stylistic elements. She traces this tradition back to nineteenth-century French literature, and links its development in film form to the success of the hard-boiled American novel (translated for the famous *Série noire* paperback series that gave its name to the genre) as well as French crime writers – Simenon in particular.

She highlights the diversities of the trends and the strong commonalities that, from the poetic realism of the 1930s to the New Wave and Melville, make so many key French films genuine film noir: a focus on atmosphere rather than on action, moral ambivalence, unstable male heroes, particular attention devoted to photography and light. However, it is what Vincendeau calls ‘social voyeurism’ (the attention to and grounding in specific social realities), the self-reflexivity and its

marginalization of female characters that gives France's versatile breed of film noir its specificity.

Phil Powrie picks up from Vincendeau to outline the impact of the Algerian War and May 68 on the thematic and stylistic development of French noir cinema. The 1970s films reflect a growing climate of suspicion and paranoia, offering a pessimistic vision of state corruption as well as social and ethnic tensions. In the 1980s, the growing success of American thrillers and the rise of their Americanized French counterpart seemingly mirror French audiences' preference for American productions over national cinema. The *cinéma du look*'s 'postmodern thriller', with its oneiric tone, marks the return of French noir trends that combine a reflexive use of American codes within a 'quintessentially French' atmosphere. The 1990s see the emergence of what Powrie calls 'hyper-noir': a blend of noir elements, extreme moral ambivalence and a fascination for the abject. Powrie's absorbing piece concludes with a discussion of the controversial *Baise-moi* (Virginie Despentes, 2000), emphasizing the film's radical reworking of the genre's misogynistic representation of gender.

In the first chapter on British cinema, Robert Murphy reminds us how the equation of British cinema with realism has overshadowed the existence of key trends in British filmmaking, and convincingly argues for the rediscovery of British noir, previously dismissed as a mere by-product of American genre cinema. Tracing the emergence of the tradition to popular entertainment and Victorian melodrama, he demonstrates how, even though British noir borrowed stylistic and thematic elements from German expressionism, French poetic realism, American hardboiled literature and crime films, it nevertheless developed as a distinct indigenous group of films. The exploration of the underbelly of society, the presence of 'damaged men', the attention to realistic detail and the angst-ridden tone characterize much of the postwar production up to the mid 1960s and typify British cinema's own vein of noir, 'tantalizingly similar, but fundamentally different' (p. 103) from its American counterpart.

Spicer's compelling examination of British neonoir usefully combines a description of narrative, thematic and stylistic variations with a consideration of the economic context of production. The financial opportunities afforded by funding from Hollywood studios played a key role in the resurgence of the British crime film in the late 1960s and its withdrawal precipitated a period of low production until the restructuring of finances through television investment and European coproduction in the 1980s. The British corpus generally displays the features characteristic of neonoir as a whole – an emphasis on visual style, and a fascination for existential angst and moral ambiguity – combined with a self-reflexivity and intertextuality born out of a deep familiarity with American genre cinema. Yet a strong sense of national identity is in evidence in the quasi-documentary attention devoted to specific social

contexts as well as a highly developed sense of location, whether it is the underbelly of London or the industrial landscape of northern cities.

In the strongly polarized political context of Thatcherism, European art cinema became increasingly influential and British neonoir started to display what Spicer describes as a ‘sense of *dépaysement* and paranoia’ (p. 121). In the 1990s, the reemergence of a commercially oriented film industry gave a new impetus to genre filmmaking. Spicer’s insightful analysis shows that the most successful of the British neonoir films manage to combine their generic borrowings with a specific sense of context.

The first chapter on German cinema, by Tim Bergfelder, is underpinned by the author’s contention that the relationship between postwar German cinema and film noir is paradoxical. Although it is commonly accepted that Weimar cinema is a key element of the genre’s genealogy, film noir appears to have had little impact on postwar Germany, where directors, audiences and critics generally shunned American genres. Yet classical noir tropes emerged, in particular in the films of former exiles who had worked on Hollywood noir productions (Peter Lorre, Robert Siodmark, Frank Wisbar and Fritz Lang, amongst others), offering a way to ‘articulate the “symbolic baggage” of a still present and unmastered past’ (p. 155).

Paul Cooke considers the relationship between film noir and more recent German cinema in the light of Jameson’s dichotomy between modernist parody and postmodernist pastiche,<sup>1</sup> and contrasts New German cinema’s modernist strand of neonoir (Wim Wenders and Rainer Fassbinder) with the more commodified forms adopted in contemporary productions. Typical of the love/hate relationship that the new generation of German filmmakers have for American culture, New German Cinema’s reworking of American generic codes appear as a means of ‘negotiating the Nazi past and the “Americanized” present’ (p. 164). While they seemingly leave behind the critical reflexivity of their predecessors, recent explorations of the genre by German filmmakers stretch the definition of postmodern noir beyond simple mainstream pastiche by using noir tropes in order to address contemporary social issues and in particular the experience of East Germans after reunification.

‘There is no such thing as Spanish film noir’, reads the opening to Rob Stone’s chapter on Spanish cinema. Smothered by the Francoist stronghold, Spanish cinema would not be allowed to create the kind of pessimistic, implicitly critical view of society that film noir entails. Yet Stone creates a gripping account of filmmakers using their films as ‘Trojan horses’, deploying remarkable narrative and aesthetic inventiveness to express a critical vision and a noir sensibility in defiance of the censors. Focusing on the issue of gender representation, Ann Davies surveys the development, in the post-Franco era, of a substantial corpus of Spanish neonoir, including the significant trend of retronoir. In the only chapter on Italian film noir, Mary Wood offers a thorough

<sup>1</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1990).

historical contextualization, starting with a reminder of how the widely used term *giallo* frequently designates Italian versions of noir. As Wood shows, Italian cinema developed its own version of noir in the context of massive social and political changes – the memory of the recent fascist era being imperfectly subsumed under social and political corruption and the growth of American-style consumerism. Outlining Italian noir cinema's distinctiveness, Wood offers an enthralling analysis of the use of architecture and space, identifying the tension between modernist and baroque architecture as a *mise en abyme* of collective anxieties.

As with any collection of essays, it is possible to take issue with the structure and the topic coverage: inevitably, certain contributions appear of greater interest and depth. I would have liked more on the influence of European noir on cinemas in other regions of the world, and in particular on the work of contemporary American filmmakers – but this, arguably, is the stuff of further publications. If the structure of the book does at times feel restrictive, limiting the comparative analysis of movements and films across time and national boundaries, it has the advantage of making this collection a coherent key pedagogical tool, useful to lecturers and students alike. The detailed and often revealing analysis of the formal achievements of specific films or groups of films also turns it into an inspiring read for researchers in the field. The benefit of such in-depth explorations of the visual as well as thematic noir tropes is that they create resonances throughout the book – a key quality for a successful compilation. The book demonstrates how the presence of strong national characteristics, the attention devoted by the directors to the changing realities they lived through and the anchoring of their noir worlds within particular historical and spatial contexts are the quintessence of European noir cinema – revealing an unmistakably noir 'tone' that emerges through specific landscapes and visions.

Karen L. Ishizuka and Patricia R. Zimmermann (eds), *Mining the Home Movie: Excavations in Histories and Memories*. London: University of California Press, 2008, 333 pp.

RYAN SHAND

Film archives are full of home movies and amateur films, often accounting for the majority of regional collections. Yet while various individuals have been quick to realize the potential of this material, film scholars have been more hesitant. Patricia R. Zimmermann is an exception, and in collaboration with the documentary producer Karen L. Ishizuka she organized a conference which has resulted in this volume of exploratory essays. Contributions are drawn from filmmakers who use home movies in their own work and archivists who hold extensive knowledge of film collections.

While the majority of the book focuses on reflections from these filmmakers and archivists, ranging as they do from the overly personal to the overtly promotional, theoretical speculation is narrowed to two essays by the film scholars Roger Odin and Robert Rosen. Odin hypothesizes that, 'The rising interest in amateur productions is one symptom of micromovements fighting for identity and the dissolution of a structured public space' (p. 267). Indeed, this collection is characterized by a strong suspicion of professional practice in its contemporary commercial forms. Energy is redirected into alternative practices that aim to reclaim this obsolete media and chart its journey, 'from the private to the public realm' (p. 126). This movement is a key trope and the tools of close stylistic analysis are employed to ease the transition. In this respect the collection addresses one of the central criticisms of Zimmermann's previous study, of which Janine Marchessault suggested that, 'One of the necessary limitations of a social history like *Reel Families* is that it must rely on the materiality of

- 1 Janine Marchessault, 'A review of *Reel Families: a Social History of Amateur Film*', *Screen*, vol. 37, no. 4 (1996), p. 422.

discourses rather than the films themselves'.<sup>1</sup> In *Mining the Home Movie*, individual films and filmmakers are at the forefront of an attempt to restore agency to film practice in the amateur arena. While this is a welcome methodological development on the part of the editors, the problem is that, for the most part, the contributors find it difficult to rise to the task of selection and interpretation. The films are described to the reader, but duplication of established perspectives and repetition of archival restoration strategies unfortunately do the topic little justice. However, one phrase from the filmmaker Péter Forgács resonates: 'Perhaps the home moviemaker, the "hero" of this essay, lies somewhere between the citizen and the voyeur' (p. 51). This tension between civic respectability and private obsession echoes the editorial perspective noted earlier, and it is precisely these issues that make the contributions from Odin and Rosen so intriguing.

Despite being located towards the back of the volume, Odin's essay raises points that are relevant to many of the preceding pieces, albeit with a more sophisticated methodology. Eschewing the assumptions of New Criticism, he asserts that, 'The modalities of textual construction change in relation to context' (p. 255) and he subsequently demonstrates this in his case study. Home movies and amateur films are frequently presented as unparalleled sources of historical evidence; as in, for example, the introduction which states: 'The historical reclamation of home movies is linked explicitly with the developing area of trauma, a response to the surface vacuity of postmodernism and a return to the referent and the real' (p. 21). This view of amateur film as a form of record is widespread among the archivists, yet Odin correctly points out that:

In the family domain, a home movie does not function as documentation. The family film is, in fact, a *counter-document*. . . . To read a home movie as a document is to "use" it for something that is not its own function. (p. 261)

Thus, while the evidential impulse is overriding for some, it is not necessarily one that should be shared by film scholars. Odin's key insights concern spectatorship, and he offers Boris Eikenbaum's notion of 'interior language' as one way of understanding the unique subjectivity of viewing home movies; noting the unbridgeable gulf that separates the pleasures of the home movie for the familiar and the unfamiliar viewer (p. 260). Further to this, he notes that 'A film of minor importance can suddenly become a fabulous document when the historical context of reading changes' (p. 262). The value of this statement can most clearly be seen in the footage that survives of American concentration camps for Japanese-Americans during World War II, taken by the prisoners themselves. This footage was subsequently used in the documentary *Something Strong Within* (Robert A. Nakamura, 1995), before being accepted into the National Film Registry. This process is documented in three essays that explain how films that might have seemed naive at the time can mean so much more today.

The volume does gravitate towards the most unusual or idiosyncratic home movie practices in order to provide fresh perspectives. As Zimmermann and Ishizuka state: 'we focus on home movies that rewrite the body of difference into the text' (p. 17). However, this difference is perhaps only made explicit through the way in which this raw visual material is later used by filmmakers. It is this process that Rosen considers when he writes that, 'Considered metaphorically, *Something Strong Within* can be conceived of as a building site where three groups of intentioned memory workers converge in the construction of meaning' (p. 108). Most importantly for the themes of this collection, this convergence occurs around a traumatic event in American history, echoing Zimmermann's theoretical concern with ideas around 'trauma' in her closing essay (pp. 275–88). For Rosen, this example of an insider's view of almost forgotten events has a broader resonance, 'Without unduly romanticizing the past, it seems both fair and accurate to characterize the work of the picture takers as acts of resistance' (p. 116). This is a valid observation in relation to this particular example, but it is difficult to connect this with the broader range of material that inhabits the category of 'home movies'.

Indeed, it becomes clear that the contributors are constantly pushing at the boundaries of this definition. For example, Iván Trujillo notes, 'The variety and scope of these films in UNAM exceed and problematize the conventional notions of the home movie' (p. 61), and Ayisha Abraham writes, 'As I encounter more films and amateur practitioners, the variety and energy in this ostensibly "domestic" filmmaking is a revelation' (p. 170). And as even Zimmermann acknowledges, 'The home movie is a small subset of the larger, multilayered complex of the international amateur film' (p. 9). In short, the title is misleading given the stated desire to 'rethink amateur film beyond . . . the domestic sphere' (p. 6). This limited definition of amateur cinema will not be advanced by focusing on exceptional case studies or discussion of genres that are clearly neither 'amateur' nor 'home movies' (local topicals, sponsored films, newsreels and independent cinema). The contributors constantly sidestep in-depth discussion of home movies; thus these essays may be of more interest to scholars of documentary than those of amateur cinema *per se*. Too often examples are used to critique the failings of commercial cinema, yet this antagonism ignores the shared inheritances that exist between amateur and professional cinema in its various forms. As Odin warns: 'We must resist mystifying these productions as much as we formerly scorned them' (p. 267). Almost in complete contrast to the excesses of 'high' theory on commercial cinema, this collection contains much empirical observation and little in the way of original conceptual developments.

**Victoria Best and Martin Crowley, *The New Pornographies: Explicit Sex in Recent French Fiction and Film*. New York, NY and Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007, 264 pp.**

**Clarissa Smith, *One for the Girls! The Pleasures and Practices of Reading Women's Porn*. Chicago, IL and Bristol: Intellect, 2007, 263 pp.**

**BETH JOHNSON**

'Pornography', Victoria Best and Martin Crowley assert, 'shatters the barriers between the object of art and its spectators, refuses the distance of contemplation and reflection, and highlights the relationship between art and the unethical, avid desire of the consumer' (p. 5). *The New Pornographies* and *One for the Girls!* both seek to convey an academic comprehension of pornographic texts that exceeds a simplistic understanding of pornographic materials as mere commodities. Indeed, while highlighting certain new pornographies' commercial success, both texts position new pornographies as complex, often troubled, symbols of political and personal liberation and/or alienation. Furthermore, these books seek to explore the 'significance that lies behind [new pornographies'] appropriation and deformation' in order to consider the ability of such texts to 'disturb and enlighten the spectator/reader with unexpected angles on this opaque and mysterious body [of work] in its moments of *extremis*' (p. 9).

In order to foreground the alignment of contemporary literary and cinematic texts with the aesthetics, codes and tropes of the pornographic register, Best and Crowley focus their attentions on moving beyond an understanding of new pornographies simply as symptoms of pornography's cultural dominance. Instead, they advocate a cultural studies approach, nominating a 'consideration of what issues might be at stake – socially, culturally, politically and aesthetically – in the decision by a range of writers and artists to use the pornographic as a key point of

reference' (pp. 1–2). Such an address is penetrating in that, while acknowledging the problematics of defining pornography and its related longstanding political debates, *The New Pornographies* is a text that moves beyond the traditional pornographic debate to examine pornographic images at a 'critical distance'. That is, Best and Crowley produce an alternative study that seeks to address why this explicit mode of sexual representation has become so prevalent, so desired, so visible and successful in France and internationally over the last ten years. This text critically addresses the failure of the body, of sexual politics and of consumerism to facilitate pleasure in contemporary society by pointing out that the objects of study *themselves* engage with such issues via an appropriation of AIDS, anxiety, abuse and individualism.

Predominantly, the texts addressed by Best and Crowley are serious, self-conscious and purposefully invoke critical and theoretical knowledge in order to make visible the sexual and social anxieties of the age. Distinguishing earlier avant-garde 'erotic' texts from the corpus explored here, Best and Crowley nominate a distinction within the contemporary works they address: 'the pornography . . . is no longer fun', for 'unlike their Sadean predecessors, these protagonists . . . lack any frame of reference'. 'Even the pure loss of Bataillan expenditure without reverse', they argue, 'shines with the happy glow of ontological authenticity and perverted existential heroism' (pp. 10–11). Contemporary texts, it is argued, thus need to be viewed and situated in alternative contexts.

Best and Crowley's fascinating consideration of the phenomenon of pornographic displeasure is explicated through both close analysis and a critical discussion of the relay between fantasy and reality by illuminating the 'interplay of notions of distance and proximity in relation to the aesthetic' (p. 18). This text challenges and incites with its discussions of gender and difference, at once recognizing the prevalence of heterosexuality and misogyny often found (and criticized) in new pornographies without adhering to a single-perspective approach. Instead, pointing to a failure, or de-formed recognition, of the gendered other, *The New Pornographies* utilizes such debates to mobilize issues concerning the revelation of the contemporary cultural moment.

The chapter 'From revolution to abjection' maps out an exciting explication of the significance of Georges Bataille's notion of *l'informe* (formlessness) in relation to a disruption of the symbolic, illuminating the link between transgressive material and subversive forms of discourse. It is argued that: 'The concept of formlessness is intriguing for it demonstrates how any kind of transgression exists in intimate relationship with the rules it sets out to undermine, an important acknowledgement for theorising the potentially revolutionary power of language' (pp. 122–3). This understanding is aligned with the concept of disenchantment with both art itself in the present day, or, more specifically, perhaps, the *reception* of art. Invoking Kristeva, the authors note the 'possibility of revolution via . . . the discomfort, the lack of

understanding and the repulsion that such works engender in the viewer/reader' (p. 125). Contextualizing such arguments, the authors suggest that defiance of the construction of meaning may be understood as 'revolutionary'. Film theorists Linda Williams and Vivian Sobchack are also acknowledged here in relation to pornographic film and its newfound ability to resist giving in to scopophilic pleasure. These theorists are nominated in order to make visible the significance of troubling spectatorship in line with Baudrillard's concept of the 'hyperreal' – 'an excessive form of simulation' (p. 130), particularly in reference to *Le Pornographe* (Bertrand Bonello, 2002). Furthermore, a Lacanian psychoanalytic approach is also adopted in respect of the 'object-gaze' of new pornographies through which, Žižek relays, the spectator is forced into a 'perverse relationship with the image' (p. 134).

In other chapters specific critical address is given to Clotilde Escalle, Marie Nimier, Alina Reyes, Catherine Breillat, Guillaume Dustan and Erik Rémès, Catherine Millet, Virginie Despentes, Michel Houellebecq, Christine Angot and Nicolas Jones-Gorlin. The discussion of Houellebecq entitled 'Misery, pornography, utopia' is also a high point of the book in which the link between new pornographies, misery and love (or the lack of it in the modern world) is interrogated by way of exploring Houellebecq's representations of gender difference, group sex, tenderness and capital gain/commercial desire on an international scale.

Clarissa Smith's *One for the Girls!* also addresses the commercialized contemporary production, dissemination and reception of pornography; however, as the title of her text suggests, Smith focuses on new pornography made for women. Unlike Best and Crowley, who nominate and explore a variety of literary and filmic art texts, Smith concentrates on one UK magazine publication, *For Women*. Significantly, *For Women* was established and came to prominence in the 1990s (as did several of the texts that Best and Crowley address). Focusing upon images of naked male models which have been formatted to appeal to a female viewer, Smith negotiates several academic theories – dialogism, media consumption and audience research – through which, ultimately, she seeks to consider the publication as a cultural product itself. Again, like Crowley and Best, Smith acknowledges the traditional problematics of the pornographic debate and engages with these arguments (albeit on a limited basis) to position erotic and pornographic texts within the schema of culture, both high and popular, as well as cultural studies. Notably, however, the distinction between this text and *The New Pornographies* is most apparent in the audience research that essentially operates as the principal argument/evidence of *One For The Girls!* The latter also addresses the historic commercial failure of women's porn and, most significantly, the 'absence of women readers of sexually explicit materials in most discussions' (p. 48).

Like *The New Pornographies*, Smith's text is multi-disciplinary, yet, as a close analysis of one publication, its approach is different. While acknowledging the paradoxical desires of the censor and the desires of

the reader – to see more – Smith’s text is infinitely more user-friendly and readable than *The New Pornographies* but it is neither as cogent nor as critically engaged in theoretical terms. *One for The Girls!* looks afresh at women’s pornography, focusing on what women can discover about themselves by engaging with something different in a different way. Smith embraces the variety of differing responses to the publication, the fact that decoded meanings must be understood in the realms of polysemy and contestation. However, she also notes the distinction between UK pornographic publications for men and those designed for women, concluding that in *For Women* ‘the sexual explicitness of the magazine is related as real-life experience [direct engagement by the readers discussing personal desires, problems and so on] rather than fantasy’ (p. 112). As such, Smith asserts, the ‘magazine is located at a precarious site between sexual pleasure and sexual danger’ (p. 112). This debate is taken forward to highlight the appropriation of women’s sexual experiences as neither ‘wholly good nor wholly bad’ (p. 119) and, as such, is neither simplistic nor reductive.

Smith engages with differing ‘possibilities of pleasure’ (p. 136) via a consideration of authenticity, reader responses and feminist theory. A strong consideration of the complexities of ‘the gaze’ is given in the chapter ‘Raunchy nude photosets’, in which Smith discusses the arguments of Richard Dyer, Catharine MacKinnon, Janice Galloway, Laura Mulvey and Kathy Myers in relation not only to the content and context of the images and articles in *For Women*, but, significantly, to the appropriation of photosets which allows for an illumination of the importance of ‘narrative’ in women’s porn. As Smith notes: ‘Within their own six- or eight-page frames the photosets proffer a display of a male body in contrasting, embellishing and/or elaborating poses which are also complemented intertextually across the rest of the magazine’ (p. 180). This schema of formatting is related directly to the concept of multiple identification stemming from and embraced by *For Women* and, as such, can be aligned with Smith’s overarching intention to ‘refute the idea of pornography as a “mono-logic” tool of ideological discourse’ (p. 224). Conclusively, then, it is argued that ‘people don’t interpret pornography, they respond to it and in and through those responses accord it a significance in their understanding of themselves’ (p. 227).

While this is a liberating conclusion it is also problematic in that it fails to mark out how, why or if, in fact, men’s pornography can be theorized differently. Smith does not investigate the significance of narrative in male softcore applications, for example. Certainly, this conclusion relates to Smith’s specific findings from interviewing women who consume *For Women*, yet a clear explication of how and in what ways men may respond to (softcore) pornography of a similar type is lacking, and it is therefore difficult to contextualize Smith’s addition to the field of gendered pornographic reception on a larger scale. Despite this, Smith is clear that her aim in the production of this text is to address the aforementioned absence of women readers in discussions of sexually

explicit materials. Indeed, Smith's text undoubtedly attempts to redress the balance – the silence of female consumers of women's pornography – by contemplating such responses within wider contexts of lived experiences, institutional practices and social schemas of production at a specific moment in time in order to attain a broader understanding of the possibilities of pleasure.

*The New Pornographies*, while making visible the 'striking advance of pornography into the western cultural mainstream', also has its own limitations in that the sheer number of works and theories discussed presupposes a diverse and inconclusive address of contemporary pornographies. For example, while utilizing a heavy Lacanian psychoanalytic approach in certain areas, Best and Crowley are (self-consciously) unstable in their various approaches to differing texts. While the theme of sexual anxiety ties together the works discussed, no clear explication is given as to how the literary texts and filmic texts nominated present anxiety differently in formal terms. Nonetheless, the discussion of literature and film in this study is fascinating and profoundly disrupts the relationship between the emotional and the pornographic to address the theoretical matrix that informs spectators/readers' oscillation between 'imbrication of the sordid and the tender' (p. 204). Like Smith, Best and Crowley acknowledge that the 'urge to link explicit images of sexuality to substantive cultural, political or ethical concerns produces a far from uncomplicated picture' (p. 17). Chapter 5 is useful in explicating this type of complex and often oppositional engagement with new pornographies through close analysis of Catherine Millet (who purposefully positions herself 'at a distance' from her reader) and Virginie Despentes (who insists on a suffocatingly close representation of the extreme).

If Best and Crowley fail to demystify the multiple complexities of new pornographies, this is because such a task is reductive and not desired. What *The New Pornographies* achieves is far more subversive than this. Best and Crowley articulate an exciting and diverse 'ocularcentric revision'<sup>1</sup> of new pornographies which questions key divisions between art and obscenity, normative and transgressive structures of production and reception, and the problematization of meaning in light of contemporary desires.

<sup>1</sup> Beth Johnson, *Ocularcentric (Re)vision: Fucking, Looking and Blinding* (Unpublished doctoral thesis, Lancaster University, 2007).

**Antonia Lant and Ingrid Periz (eds), *The Red Velvet Seat: Women's Writing on the First Fifty Years of Cinema*. London: Verso, 2006, 896 pp.**

**BRYONI TREZISE**

Before the advent of cinema, the female voyeur was a social taboo. Being seen to be seeing was an admission of desire, a public act of clammy embarrassment akin to being caught like 'a child caught at the jampot' (p. 61). The kinds of viewing engendered by early cinema, and marked by the women writers on cinema in this collection, evidence a florid awakening to the otherwise forbidden sensuosities of spectatorship. Being caught guiltily at the jampot is a motif that replays within *The Red Velvet Seat* to represent the provocative unfolding of two deeply entwined histories: the rise of early cinema and the rise of the modern woman. That cinema offered new forms of voyeurism and enabled the emergence of different kinds of female sociality is one important insight of this publication; that the rise of cinema and female emancipation should have such knotted cultural narratives is the most interesting premiss of the text's sociohistorical recollection.

Editors Antonia Lant and Ingrid Periz have anthologized a wide range of writings on cinema spanning its first fifty-five years (1895-1950). The collection also ranges wide geographically (writings originate in the USA, Italy, France, Germany and the UK), across literary genres (from agony columns and etiquette manuals to newspaper editorials, travelogues and film journals) and across different classes (from housewives to the intelligentsia to African-American writers). The thread that runs through these diverse texts is the female authorial voice, which appears variously as humorous, biting, wry, provocative, philosophical, socially authoritative and morally righteous. The result is a polyvocal history of early cinema comprised not only of the writers included in this collection but of their diverse textual outputs. This is a sociocultural

insight in itself, and one of the great strengths of the publication: it insists that women were cognizant of cinema's role in forging their emergent social status. The pleasures of revisiting such archival documents lie in how they depict an alternate cinematic modernity, one plotted through the literary cadences and rhythms of a past.

The selection charts a historical backdrop marked by enormous political and industrial upheaval, and the texts are thematically collated to present cinema as a social lens that refracted such change. In this sense, the volume strikes laterally at the different impacts emergent cinema had on the lives of women – from its force as a social power and its role in charting new critical voices and craftsmanship, to its broader impact in the everyday circumstances of family, workplace and polis. When women began attending movies their menfolk were at war, and they were negotiating the terms of a new labour market fuelled by the mechanics and productivity of industry. In the cinema itself they were suddenly exposed: newsreels, the sexualization of plant life, the anthropological finds of ethnographic enterprise in far away lands – the worldliness of such imagery was set against the stark confrontation with their own faces in closeup, as visual objects of desire. The collection enables a broad-based investigation into the effect of burgeoning modernity on the material lives of women. In privileging the female eye, the editors extend a possibly saturated but narrow literature on the film cultures of modernity to reinscribe the contributions of women as essential. The collection highlights the manifold relationships struck between the female viewer and cinematic form, and makes clear the characteristics of gender performance that were marked or produced by cinema itself.

In being 'triply swirled with an alertness to gender' (p. 35), the text produces the red velvet seat as a circuitous metaphor that signifies both new gender practices invited by cinema and the correlative sociohistorical gendering 'eye' constituted by the emergent cohistories of cinema and female spectatorship. Lant and Periz characterize the seat as the 'synecdochal female fundament' (p. 42), writing that women's 'rapture . . . lay in venturing through the outer portal, nestling in a seat, observing curtains open, and sensing the onset and process of projection' (p. 21). Historical entries on the experience of cinematic form also record an immanent eroticization of the cinema space. Women longed for 'the give of velvet-upholstered chairs, perfumed darkness and any old love story' (p. 42), not least for the sense of 'electric hush, the rapt immobility' it gave them (p. 102). Focusing on the language tropes of the times provides an interesting insight into the varied pleasures and vocabularies of pleasure which the specificity of cinematic experience was able to express for women. Here we note cinema's emancipatory role: women were able to, in the dark seduction of velvet and silent image, submit themselves to 'indubitable sensuousness' (p. 42).

*The Red Velvet Seat* inscribes a continuity between cultural shifts in womanhood across modernity and the cultural gendering of cinemagoing

itself, where the seat becomes a site heavy with tension: the tension produced by a newer art form, but also a newer shape through which to practise the subjectivities of class, sex and their associated networks of knowledge and power. It was in this very seat that women flexed their intelligence, their newly-won social freedom, their avoidance of the malaise of marriage and motherhood. The same seat, however, produced now well-worn linkages between cinema and psychoanalysis, and the complex refractions the text strikes between gender and sightedness are poignant, for they mark the dawning of a gaze in which women were 'looking and being looked at, seeing and being seen' (p. 49). In this respect, the seat is a thorny reminder of the risks in eliding cinematic awakening with the tropes of gender. The body, repeatedly working in the text as a sign of empowered womanhood, here plays out a different conceit made in the conjunction between cinema and an exclusively feminized form of pleasure. That female cinematic experience cannot be extricated from discourses of women as ubiquitously sensuous progenitors of *experience* is a reminder that questions of gender often have difficulty surmounting the presuppositions from which they originate. Indeed, this is a methodological provocation of the collection that the editors themselves note.

A more subtle thread running through the volume is an awareness that women encountered cinema as a cultural index of loss. Beyond the newly available catalogue of death offered by the newsreel, cinema charted a sobering poesis of the clamours of twentieth-century industrial life. Dizzying changes in labour patterns, industrial cogs feeding new capital and market; all of this set against the physical losses wrought by two world wars flanking economic depression. As the authors explain: 'Women had a structurally different experience of modernity: they experienced different social duties and biological capacities; different, and usually narrower means of access to culture, knowledge and public life; and different work patterns' (p. 12). The writers in the collection reveal the impact cinema had on effecting newer social roles. Milena Jesenska writes in 1920 that cinema allowed for crucial amnesiac relief 'because in the face of our misshapen lives we are impotent' (p. 97). Iris Barry writes six years later that cinema felt like pure remedy against the machinic world, against 'too much actual experience' (p. 146). In this sense, cinema comes to play not only as an escape from grief or doldrum, but as a cultural restorative of a sense of self that had been made redundant elsewhere.

While loss was a physical and ontological experience of the new century, part of its charge was delivered by the scope that cinema introduced into the visual sphere. Cinema not only charted but created newer relations of power, and the editors provide detailed investigation into how power was conceptualized by women of the era. Largely played out through battles with censorship regimes, writers were divided on the merits of cinema culture, either decrying its role in providing consumable immorality for the working classes, or applauding its value in being a true 'people's university' (p. 345). Yet Barry's call for the

public to 'see how blatantly it is being spoon-fed and ask for slightly better dreams' is telling: she ironically remarks on the scriptural insistence that repeatedly positions marriage as the 'end' rather than 'beginning' of life's difficulties (p. 134).

The collective delight in primitivism mapped by writers in the volume also speaks of cinema's own engagements with, and enactments of, power regarding the cultural exotica it screened. The editors here astutely note the correlation between 'the medium's transparency (its verisimilitude)', and 'the assumed simple-mindedness of the non-Western audience' (p. 16). The history of the twentieth-century museumification of ethnographic exotica runs alongside the history of its discursive reception in cinematic form. This aspect of the collection is astounding for its illumination of cinema as a culpable player in (and producer of) the darker discourses of modernity. Reading these texts from the standpoint of an image-saturated present is to perceive how much of the world was visually unknown for the writers within the collection. While their function is to demonstrate the expansion of visuality that cinema enabled, as texts they are reminders of the contemporary legacies of the ethnographic cinematic eye, where documentations of 'Fetish worshippers in "Darkest Africa" . . . the Hindoo prostrating himself before his gods . . . the Chinaman in his queue and the Turk in his flowing robes' (p. 324) reveal the racial politics apparent in cinema's mapping of a dominant cultural imaginary, still present one hundred years hence.

Other issues raised by the collection position women thinkers as forthright social commentators, political activists and as developed artistic progenitors dedicated to the purity of cinematic form. Through its multiple lenses, *The Red Velvet Seat* offers a deep extension of cinema's cultural record. It registers what many films that survive omit: women's power as social organizers, their liberatory capacity as disseminators of knowledge, information and ideas, and their enthusiasm for 'the 'universal *engine* that is the cinema' (p. 201). As these writings reveal, cinema crystallized the experience of womanhood. It was a site through which the modern woman exercised (and exorcized) herself. Cinema was the new model – the cultural forum – for the experimentation and rehearsal of new feminisms and femininities.

As the flipside to the millennial turn towards the digital and informatic, it is interesting to reflect upon the kinds of questions asked by women writers a century ago, charting the rupture of a new kind of visuality into the spectrum of human experience. Questions of the role (and danger) of the cinematic eye are deeply entangled with questions of what it meant to embrace the kinds of womanhood that modernity invited and demanded, beckoning a comparative analysis of writing on newer visual media cultures and experiences of gender. In this light, the red velvet seat carries itself into the present as a historical motif rich with contemporary relevance.

## Contributors

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## Notes to Contributors

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1. Christian Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: the Imaginary Signifier*, trans. Celia Britton. Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster and Alfred Guzzetti (London: Macmillan, 1982).
2. Ginette Vincendeau, 'Melodramatic realism: on some French women's films in the 1930s', *Screen*, vol. 30, no. 3 (1989), pp. 51–65.
3. Monika Treut, 'Female misbehaviour', in Laura Pietrapaolo and Ada Testaferri (eds), *Feminisms in the Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 106–21.

References to *films* in both notes and main text should include full title with initial capitalisation according to accepted style of the language concerned. Titles should be italicised, and in the case of non-English language films original release title should precede US and/or British release title, followed by director and release date in round brackets:

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